



Social Media and Electoral Dynamics: Insights from the 2024 Indian Lok Sabha Elections

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This paper examines the evolving role of social media as a pivotal arena for political communication in the context of the 2024 Indian Lok Sabha elections. This paper particularly focuses on the strategies employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its rivals, including the Indian National Congress (INC), Trinamool Congress (TMC), and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Through a comparative analysis, it elucidates the contrasting styles and tactics of prominent leaders such as Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, and AAP's leadership, highlighting their utilization of narrative frameworks, audience engagement methods, and personality traits to mobilize support. Furthermore, the study assesses the effectiveness of independent fact-checking platforms and government initiatives in combating misinformation on social media, while also scrutinizing the Election Commission of India's (ECI) Social Media Cell's capacity to manage the challenges posed by digital media in electoral processes. This research contributes to the scholarly understanding of the intricate dynamics between social media, political communication strategies, and electoral dynamics in contemporary Indian politics.

Keywords: *Bharatiya Janata Party, Social Media, Indian National Congress, Trinamool Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, Lok Sabha election*

Introduction

The Lok Sabha elections in India are slated to occur between April 19 and June 1, 2024. The elections will be held in seven phases to elect 543 members of the Lok Sabha. The votes will be counted, and the outcomes will be declared on June 4, 2024. This election is the largest in

history, surpassing the 2019 Indian general election. The election lasts for 44 days, making it the second longest election in history, behind the 1951–52 Indian general election. Narendra Modi, the incumbent prime minister, who has completed two consecutive terms, is now vying for a third consecutive term. The number of people who are eligible to vote is around 960 million out of a total population of 1.4 billion citizens (Mogul et al., 2024). During this election, the prominence of various social media platforms has significantly increased. It is becoming more common for major political parties, including the BJP, INC, AAP, and TMC, to use social media platforms in order to communicate with and engage voters. The BJP is intensifying its outreach efforts for the 2024 Lok Sabha election, primarily through its social media advocates. The party tries to develop a fresh connection with tech-savvy individuals across the country. The BJP and its leaders, including Narendra Modi, have demonstrated a strong presence on various social media platforms. Political leaders are employing various tactics to sway voters through social media, engaging in intense battles against their opponents. When it comes to the Indian National Congress (INC), the party has strategically utilised social media as a vital tool for political communication and engagement. Led by prominent figures like Rahul Gandhi, the party has focused on fostering connections with supporters and disseminating its message across platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram. The Aam Aadmi Party is not falling behind; in fact, it actively maintains a strong presence on social media to effectively interact and communicate with its followers and a broader audience. The All-India Trinamool Congress (TMC) has also strategically leveraged social media platforms to bolster its political presence and engage with the electorate.

Over the last several years, the major political parties have consistently and progressively increased their use of social media platforms. The major political parties, including the BJP, INC, AAP, and TMC, have been adeptly using their social media channels to conduct their campaign activities during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. These platforms are being used by the parties to emphasise their accomplishments and expose the vulnerabilities of their rival parties. The BJP, in particular, is expanding its outreach plan for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections by actively involving a wide range of social media stars, including comedians, bhajan singers, food vloggers, dancers, and influencers, irrespective of their political connections.

BJP's Social Media Tactics: 2024 Lok Sabha Election Insights

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), established in 1980, has the distinction of being the biggest political party in the world. Currently, it is the leading party in the NDA, which governs India. The BJP is widely regarded as a strong leader on many prominent social media platforms in India, and they skillfully use the possibilities of digital communication to appeal to voters and propagate their message. The BJP's varied approach comprises enlisting influential figures from other domains, such as comedians, musicians, and vloggers, who have a significant following on social media. This strategy is used to disseminate the storylines more extensively and guarantee visibility even in distant geographical areas. An aspect that is notable in the party's implicit collaboration with this influential group of opinion leaders is its determination to advance inclusive development and use strategic communications. Furthermore, the BJP has strategically introduced novel applications designed for focused communication with the aim of significantly broadening their influence, particularly at the grassroots level. By effectively engaging with leaders and influencers, as well as advertising tools, the BJP is actively expanding its digital presence. They recognise that social media is an essential medium for digital communication in today's world.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) recognises the evolving landscape of social media as an essential battleground for political communication, prompting a revamp of its strategy to maintain its edge over rivals who are also harnessing digital platforms for public outreach. Having experienced significant success in the 2014 and 2019 general elections due to its proactive social media engagement, the ruling party is now gearing up to enhance its presence across various platforms ahead of the 2024 polls, targeting specific audiences in smaller cities and towns. The BJP intends to launch two new apps aimed at improving communication with party members and reaching out to floating voters who may not be bound by ideological affiliations. With India witnessing a surge in internet users and social media usage, the BJP aims to refresh its social media strategy, focusing on regional languages to connect with citizens in diverse regions. The party recognises the importance of adapting to the changing digital landscape, where influencers wield considerable influence, and emphasises the need for effective strategy, execution, and outreach across different segments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has

underscored the importance of enhancing the party's digital presence, emphasising seamless communication between elected representatives and voters, and combating misinformation about the government and the party in real-time.

The BJP's social media strategy for the 2024 Lok Sabha election is multifaceted, aiming to intensify outreach efforts through social media advocates and establish connections with tech-savvy individuals. With over 180 million memberships, the party seeks to engage actively with its vast online community, comprising approximately 99 percent of its members who are internet users(Kumar Thakur, 2023). Leveraging India's expansive internet user base, including a growing rural population, the BJP plans to showcase the government's achievements and vision for India's transformation by 2047. Key focus areas include highlighting welfare schemes, the successful launch of Chandrayaan-3, addressing concerns within the Pasamanda Muslim community, women's empowerment, and combating corruption. The BJP also intends to share opposition leaders' speeches and excerpts of PM Modi's addresses to bolster its messaging. The party plans to establish over 250 call centres nationwide, staffed by trained party members, to maintain ongoing communication with the public regarding government and party initiatives(Kumar Thakur, 2023). This comprehensive approach aims to effectively reach voters across various social media platforms and call centres, ensuring widespread dissemination of the BJP's message and achievements, especially targeting women, youth, and new-age voters.

In light of the impact and significance of social media, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has devised the "Shankhnaad" campaign as a means to enhance the state-level social media infrastructure in preparation for the 2024 election(Gohain, 2023). As a result of the division of states and union territories, the seven zones have been established, and the party will appoint volunteer engagement prabharis and zonal prabharis to oversee the zonal campaign. The party is also conducting state- and district-level workshops.

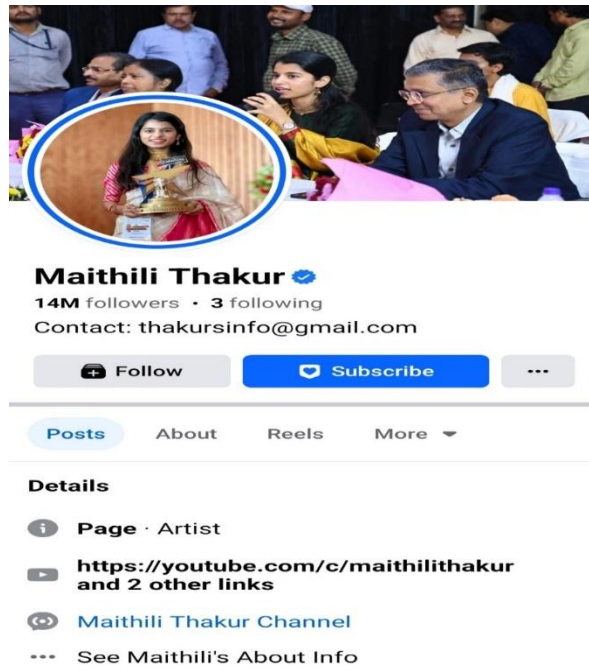
Influencer Engagement Strategy

In India, the increasing prevalence of social media celebrities vying for election campaigns is sparking political discourse. With a population exceeding 1.42 billion, India boasts the highest number of internet consumers globally, exceeding 800 million(Firstpost, 2024). The general election of 2024 holds significant importance for India, given its globally highest adoption rates of Instagram and YouTube. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has

adeptly utilised the substantial youth followings of influential social media personalities across diverse domains such as music, comedy, culture, fashion, and fitness to amplify their political messages. These influencers, including comedian and writer Amit Bhadana, who has millions of subscribers on YouTube, and folk singer Maithili Thakur, whose popularity soared after receiving recognition from Modi, often promote Hindu-majority culture and align with the BJP's right-wing ideology (Firstpost, 2024). Thakur, with millions of followers across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, is just one example of the growing influence of social media stars in India's political landscape. She is known for her Hindu devotional tunes on social media and experienced a surge in popularity when Prime Minister Modi shared her content during the inauguration of a contentious Hindu temple in Ayodhya. Thakur, among 24 influencers, was honoured at the government-organised National Creators Awards. Critics point out that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) builds its political message on the support of social media personalities from different sides, such as media and culture, fashion, and fitness, who are hugely popular among youth. They also express concerns about the potential for influencers to uncritically support the ruling party, motivated by opportunities to expand their follower base and income from social posts.



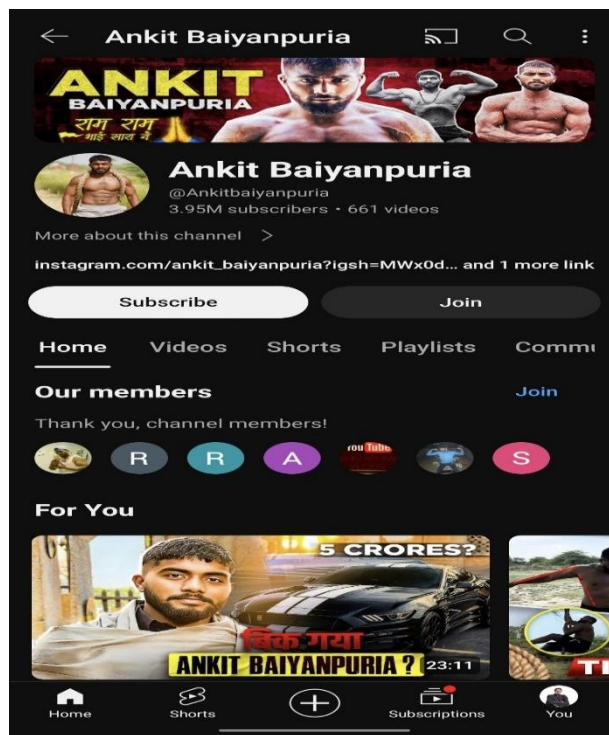
This is the screenshot of Amit Bhadana's YouTube channel



This is the screenshot of Maithili Thakur's Facebook Page

Political parties have now made influencers on the YouTube and Instagram platforms the central points for distributing micro-content that is localised and does micro-targeting, viewed by specific groups and with particular interests. This strategy aims to evoke relevant emotions in rural voters, influence voting patterns, manage crises, and streamline the electoral process. Public figures are implementing both verbal and non-verbal messaging while at the same time presenting the political narrative as subtle information that provides a human aspect of the people that they support. This can be seen as a completely different approach than that of a traditional celebrity like an actor or a sports icon. Influencers use social media to personalise this persona, which they aim to make their followers love or hate. Despite the fact that the absence of clarity on their compensation raises questions about the promotional nature of their content, illegitimate paid product placements serve as one more foundation for the spreading of the fabricated message, which can undermine vital electoral integrity. Apart from this, these tactics bypass the limitations put on political advertisement by the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is the autonomous body coordinating all the elections in the country.

The observation of Prateek Waghre from the Indian Freedom Foundation proves that introducing these programmes is not safe at all, as the influencers are not only attracted by money or an opportunity to promote themselves, but also use their platforms to support a party of their choice without being obliged to do so (Firstpost, 2024). Young people constitute a major segment of the Indian population, accounting for more than fifty percent of the population, and social media serves as an essential tool for bringing young people into political obedience. While Thakur was made the election commission ambassador, who was allowed to run the Hamari campaign but not for political endorsement by himself, Ankit openly urged his followers to vote for the BJP with himself in the speech of the campaign. Formerly, 'influencers' like Janhvi Singh used to be the persons who started to adjust their attitudes towards the Narendra Modi regime, though they resolved not to endorse any particular party on their profiles



This is the screenshot of Ankit Baiyanpuria's YouTube channel

The party's proactive engagement with social media influencers reflects its commitment to the principle of "sabkasaath, sabkavikas, sabkaprayas" (inclusive growth through collective effort). Recognising the influence wielded by various local influencers, the BJP seeks to establish bonds with these personalities to amplify its message effectively. This initiative, accelerated in response to the recent electoral setback in Karnataka, signifies the BJP's strategic adaptation to leverage

social media influencers in its campaign efforts. Senior party leaders, including Union ministers and MPs, have already initiated interactions with prominent influencers across different states, with a particular focus on regions gearing up for elections(Arnimesh, 2023). Through this concerted effort, the BJP aims to tap into the vast social media landscape, ensuring a multifaceted approach to connect with voters and disseminate its narrative effectively.

BJP on WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube

There are presently over 5 million WhatsApp groups that are devoted to exchanging election-related information(Madhukalya, 2024). The IT cell of the BJP, which is well-known for its effectiveness inside the party, is in charge of these groups. The party has turned its focus to Instagram and YouTube in recognition of the rising relevance of these platforms. Instagram, which is best recognised for having a younger user base in comparison to other platforms, and YouTube, which caters to a broad age range ranging from 18 to 80 years old, are currently two of the most important foci for the BJP(Paliwal, 2024). Besides concentrating on the quantity and quality of the material, the information technology cell of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is also giving priority to the rate at which they can disseminate information.

BJP on Facebook and X

The BJP is utilising Facebook to broadcast live public rallies of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah during the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The party is emphasising its accomplishments and the initiatives that it has initiated. The party recently published an interview in which Narendra Modi criticised opposition parties, focusing on the communist party of Kerala in particular. The BJP uses Facebook to solicit votes from the electorate. A vote for the BJP is a vote against naxalism and terrorism, and it will be used to institute the Ramrajya in India. Also published are rap songs that encourage voters to support the BJP. Additionally, the BJP has demonstrated that it is the first political party in India to air advertisements on search engines such as YouTube and Google Titan that exceed one hundred crore rupees.

Kumar et al., (2024) conducted a study through CSDS Lokniti, examining the social media accounts of five spokespersons each from the BJP and Congress parties. The study analysed a total of 798 tweets up until early April. Out of these, 378 statements were attributed to the spokesperson of the Congress, while 420 statements were associated with the BJP. The analysis

revealed that 53% of the posts made by the BJP were centred around local matters, while 48% were centred around national matters. Conversely, 14% of the posts made by Congress were centred around local matters, while the remaining 86% were focused on national issues. Both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (Congress) used X as a means to criticise and undermine one another. The BJP employed the hashtags #BJP4Development, #ModiHaiToMumkinHai, #PhirEkBaarModiSaarkar, and #ApkiBaar400Paar. Congress uses its separate hashtags rarely and without any noticeable combination or trend. The BJP primarily focused its advertisements on Andhra Pradesh (50%) and Odisha (39%). While the BJP published 1,111 advertisements, the INC only published 10 ads. In February 2024, the BJP became the top spender on advertisements.

Table 1.1

This table shows the followers/subscribers of BJP on various social media platforms

Political Party	Platform	Followers/Subscribers (Millions)
BJP	Facebook	16
BJP	Instagram	7.7
BJP	X	21.8
BJP	YouTube	5.86

The data was directly taken from official social media handle of BJP, dated April, 2024

Unlocking Congress's Digital Potential

Although the BJP boasts a leading digital drive that has over 109.7 percent reach,(Paliwal, 2024) Congress remains persistent and tirelessly pursues its excellence. The Congress has built a network in which they cooperate with influencers who are like-minded and create material that is in line with their beliefs. An ongoing online competition between influencers who support the Congress and others who support the BJP can be seen on the X platform. The Congress inside sources have told India Today that within 24 hours of the major events that take place in the whole country, the Congress social media team swiftly prepares their content(Paliwal, 2024). In the latest video release, the Congress provides an illustration of the arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directory. In this case, the Congress team also acts proactively by

means of WhatsApp groups and Instagram to spread its content. The party intends to air a video of Rahul Gandhi, who is relatable to the general public and embodies the qualities that make him trustworthy.

Congress on Facebook, X, YouTube and Instagram

Congress has a total of 6.8 million followers on Facebook as of April 2024. Engagement with voters around the country is accomplished through the use of Facebook by the party. On its Facebook page, the party engages in harsh criticism of the BJP and draws attention to the party's shortcomings. The party uses Facebook to spread information about its accomplishments and past work. At the moment, the party is conducting a vigorous campaign on its Facebook page in preparation for the Lok Sabha elections of 2024. On X, Congress has 10.4 million followers. X is a great platform for the Indian National Congress (INC) to communicate with their followers, share political news, and make statements. In most cases, they use X to state their stance on various political issues, disseminate news stories, and promote their rallies and campaigns. Congress leaders are increasingly using X as a platform to share their national vision, answer public concerns, and address other important issues. Generally speaking, X is a great way for the INC to reach the public directly.

On YouTube, the Congress has 4.62 million subscribers as of April 2024. The Indian National Congress (INC) utilises YouTube as a platform to disseminate its messages, speeches, rallies, and other political content. The party uploads videos of party leaders addressing various issues, engaging with the public, and promoting their policies and campaigns. YouTube provides a wide reach, allowing the INC to connect with a diverse audience across India and beyond. On Instagram, Incindia has 4.6 million followers. The Indian National Congress (INC) leverages Instagram as a potent visual platform to advance campaign promotion, facilitate audience interaction, disseminate knowledge, establish connections, and collaborate with influencers. Strategically utilising Instagram, the political party employs a range of elements, including interactive components, educational posts, community-driven articles, inclusive historical accounts, campaign materials, and behind-the-scenes moments, to shape public opinion on significant issues, educate a diverse audience, and foster a sense of unity among supporters.

Table 1.2

This table shows the followers/subscribers of INC on various social media platforms

Political Party	Platform	Followers/Subscribers (Millions)
INC	Facebook	6.8
INC	Instagram	4.6
INC	X	10.4
INC	YouTube	4.62

The data was directly taken from official social media handle of INC, dated April, 2024

Exploring AAP's Social Media Strategy

Through various social media channels such as X, Facebook, and Instagram, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) conveys messages to voters, shares events and policies, and mobilises supporters by responding to their comments and messages. As of April 2024, AAP has 6.5 million followers on X. The party uses the X platform for 2024 campaigning. On YouTube, the AAP has 6.11 million subscribers, and it exploits YouTube for broadcasting rallies and for campaigning purposes. The party employs Facebook (5.6 million followers) to communicate with the masses, particularly at a time of elections when such specific messages and content are very useful in creating awareness and asking supporters to vote for its candidates and support its policies. Social media becomes a platform for transparency and accountability because AAP announces the details of their governance and opens the door for public feedback, illustrating how their party aligns with civic activism and uses technology as a means for democratic participation. At the heart of their digital outreach stands Party Chief and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, whose X handle boasts 27.4 million followers, surpassing Rahul Gandhi's count. Memes constitute a central aspect of the Aam Aadmi Party's social media strategy. Their primary focus involves satirical jabs at the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. AAP's core strategy revolves around swift information dissemination, coupled with efforts to debunk rumours and misinformation surrounding the party and its leaders. The party demonstrates an adept understanding of the vernacular favoured by the younger demographic and capitalises on it.

Table 1.3

This table shows the followers/subscribers of AAP on various social media platforms

Political Party	Platform	Followers/Subscribers (Millions)
AAP	Facebook	5.6
AAP	Instagram	1.3
AAP	X	6.5
AAP	YouTube	6.11

The data was directly taken from official social media handle of AAP, dated April, 2024

Understanding TMC's Online Strategy

The Trinamool Congress's rallying cry, "Khela Hobe" (Game is on), has gained substantial traction on social media through a series of well-executed campaigns (Paliwal, 2024). The party's strategic focus lies primarily on platforms like Facebook and YouTube. "We are giving significant attention to Facebook and YouTube. YouTube's prominence has expanded widely throughout the state," mentioned a member of the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) team involved in the Trinamool campaign. Their digital campaign emphasises video content, often packaged in short formats not exceeding 60 seconds, aligning with the prevailing trend of reels and concise videos. The party believes this approach effectively captures attention within a brief span.

The TMC's social media strategy isn't solely centred around "Khela Hobe" but also involves amplifying the BJP's perceived anti-Bengal stance. It encompasses the concept of "Bishorjon" (decimation of evil forces), as stated by a Trinamool leader to India Today. Trinamool Congress is gearing up to defend its "territory" against the "Bangla-virodhi zamindars" (anti-Bengal feudal landlords), with the social media campaign revolving around this theme (Paliwal, 2024).

The Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) has been managing the party's communication strategy since the 2021 assembly elections in Bengal. Once again, the agency is aiding the party in constructing its campaign around the overarching narrative of the Centre allegedly neglecting the state in the disbursement of MNREGA and PM Awas Yojana dues. While the 2021 state election campaign primarily spotlighted Mamata Banerjee's charisma, pitting her against the BJP's star figure, Narendra Modi, the 2024 Lok Sabha campaign is focused on the anti-Centre theme, considering voter tendencies during general elections. In its outreach, Trinamool is also leveraging platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp to disseminate its messages. Instagram content largely comprises short reels, while on WhatsApp, the party leverages local party cadres to propagate the message. "It's a top-down approach. We ensure that with every central narrative, at the assembly and district level, they harp on the same," stated an I-PAC member.

Table 1.4

This table shows the followers/subscribers of AITC on various social media platforms

Political Party	Platform	Followers/Subscribers
AITC	Facebook	1.5 million
AITC	Instagram	112k
AITC	X	686k
AITC	YouTube	130k

The data was directly taken from official social media handles of AITC, dated April, 2024

Analysis of Party Growth on Social Media Platforms

Social media has become an integral part of political parties' strategies during elections, often reflecting broader public sentiments. As the Lok Sabha election season unfolds, the focus shifts to which party is leading the charge on social media platforms. To address this, India Today's Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) team scrutinised the growth of key social media accounts and pages belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and Trinamool Congress (TMC), along with their top leaders. Data spanning January to March was thoroughly analyzed. The analysis reveals the BJP's overwhelming dominance across social

media platforms. While the BJP continues to overshadow other parties in terms of growth, the Congress and AAP have shown prowess in attracting new users on platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Tiwari & Sharma, 2024).

According to Tiwari & Sharma (2024) on platforms such as X, consistent growth was observed for all parties. The BJP, Congress, and AAP experienced steady increases in followership, with notable exceptions like AAP's slight decline in January. YouTube serves as a significant platform for parties to disseminate speeches, campaign content, and press conferences. AAP notably demonstrated strong growth in subscribers. Despite facing challenges in subscriber growth, the BJP maintained a leading position in terms of cumulative views on its YouTube channel. Instagram, known for its appeal to younger voters, witnessed fierce competition among parties to expand their follower base. Congress led in follower acquisition, followed by the BJP and AAP, with TMC trailing behind. In terms of individual leaders, Prime Minister Narendra Modi maintains a commanding lead across all social media platforms. His follower growth significantly outpaces rivals like Gandhi, Kejriwal, and Banerjee. Modi's active engagement on platforms like X, where he published over a thousand posts in the last three months, underscores his digital presence. Modi's Instagram account, boasting an impressive 88 million-strong following, saw a substantial increase in followers. Meanwhile, Gandhi made gains in followership on Instagram and YouTube, indicating a growing digital footprint despite Modi's continued dominance.

Portrayal of Leadership Styles

According to Balakrishna and Sanyal (2024), India Today Fact Check delves into the social media strategies of Modi and Rahul Gandhi, examining their distinct styles and tactics for engaging followers. The analysis scrutinises narrative frameworks, audience engagement, and the aspects of their personalities that resonate most with supporters. By evaluating the popularity of their posts across platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, insights into their digital influence and voter sentiments are revealed. For a comprehensive understanding, hundreds of posts from both leaders across platforms were scrutinised, focusing on the period from the announcement of the election (March 16) to the first phase of polling (April 19). The top five posts on each platform, garnering millions of likes, shares, and reposts, were scrutinised

to uncover the elements driving their popularity. The study underscores the contrasting styles and strategies of Modi and Rahul, shedding light on their distinct approaches to garnering support.

Modi's digital narrative emphasises themes of spirituality and blessings, showcasing his reverence for religious icons and projecting a divine aura around his leadership. In contrast, Rahul channels public discontent and anti-incumbency sentiments, advocating for change and highlighting issues like inflation and unemployment. Their social media personas reflect curated grandeur and raw authenticity, respectively, each catering to distinct audience preferences. As the campaign intensifies, Modi and Rahul strategically navigate regional dynamics and ideological battles to solidify their positions. The nuanced portrayal of their leadership styles through social media offers insights into their broader electoral strategies and aspirations for the upcoming elections.

On March 21, 2024, AAP's chief, Arvind Kejriwal, was taken into custody by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the money laundering case that was tied to the Delhi excise policy. The social media platforms of AAP are protesting against the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, and the narratives of AAP on social media revolve around corruption, unemployment, and poverty.

At the moment, Mamta Banerjee is making good use of her social media accounts to criticise the BJP on issues like violence, unemployment, and hate politics. In her campaign for 2024, she is utilizing online platforms. She has a unique way of connecting with her followers through social media, which stems from her personal stories, political discussion, and emotional words. Banerjee's online style of communication with the audience is often marked by passions and emotions, focusing on her clear beliefs and substantial empathy towards her ideals. She frequently makes use of eye-catching slogans, vivid graphics, and multimedia content to capture attention, and the delivery of the message would be more efficient.

Table 1.5

This table shows the followers/subscribers of major politicians on various social media platforms

Politician	Followers on X (millions)	Followers on Instagram (millions)
Narendra Modi	96.9	88.3
Arvind Kejriwal	27.4	2.1
Rahul Gandhi	25.3	6.4
Mamata Banerjee	7.4	0.38

(Paliwal, 2024)

Challenges of Misinformation

The integrity of democratic processes is frequently compromised by the channels through which election-related misinformation and disinformation emerge. For example, analysis of social media misinformation during the 2019 election season revealed a great deal of false information being distributed openly, in many cases as a strategy deployed by the primary political parties against their adversaries. The false information was primarily shared via accounts linked to the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress and covered areas including electoral campaigns, corruption, religion, celebrities, nationalism, gender, and development(Lakshane, 2024.). Furthermore, occurrences of deep-fake material have been discovered circulating on networks such as WhatsApp. These fabricated videos, generated through artificial intelligence, aimed to mislead voters by portraying individuals engaging in actions or statements they never made.

The exponential proliferation of misinformation brushes off as a critical factor that might affect the forthcoming general elections. Access Now and Global Witness recent research found that 48 advertisements in English, Hindi, and Telugu were allowed by YouTube in spite of the fact that the content breached the platform’s rules on election-related disinformation (Global Witness,

2024). The accessibility of the online infrastructure, the inherent facets of digital mediums, and India's large user base greatly facilitate the rapid spread of altered information, eroding election integrity and democratic standards. Misinformation not only distorts voter perceptions and understandings of critical issues but also fosters echo chambers and erodes trust in verified information sources. While independent fact-checking platforms like AltNews and Boom, along with the government-run PIB Fact Check, strive to combat misinformation, the legal complexities surrounding the establishment of a Fact Check Unit by the Indian government underscore the ongoing challenges in addressing this pervasive issue effectively(Lakshane, 2024)

As per Reuters (2024), just a week ago, there were two AI-driven deepfake videos starring Bollywood actors. The actors were shown saying that they don't support Prime Minister Narendra Modi and requesting that their followers vote for the opposition Congress. These videos were shared extensively, thus collecting 500 000 views by the time some were pulled down. More than two police investigations have tried to take them down in Mumbai, but some of these clips are still accessible online. A social and media rights group in India by the name of Social and Media Matters conducted a survey that showed that about 80% of young voters in India are being bombarded with false news on the major social media platforms. Reportedly, WhatsApp (29.8 percent), Instagram (17.8 percent), and Facebook (15.8 percent) were the most common channels used for the dissemination of fake news.

Regulatory Mechanism

In preparation for the 2019 election, major social media platforms, including Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, ShareChat, and TikTok, among others, agreed to adhere to a "voluntary code of ethics" presented to the Election Commission of India (ECI)(*"Voluntary Code of Ethics" by Social Media Platforms to Be Observed in the General Election to the Haryana & Maharashtra Legislative Assemblies and All Future Elections*, n.d.). Under this agreement, these companies pledged to conduct educational campaigns to raise awareness about elections, establish dedicated grievance redressal channels for objectionable content, promptly address reported violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), and ensure certification for all political advertisements featured on their platforms. Despite these measures, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness of this self-regulatory framework in addressing issues such as extreme speech, algorithmic biases, and proxy campaigns.

Additionally, initiatives like "Ads Transparency," introduced by Facebook and Google before the 2019 elections, aimed to enhance transparency surrounding political advertisements (Lakshane, 2024). However, data revealed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominated digital political spending on these platforms, holding a significant share compared to other political parties. The opacity surrounding political advertising expenditures, often linked to entities with indirect or direct ties to political parties, complicates efforts to accurately track spending, particularly as it extends beyond pre-certified activities designated as political advertising by parties. Despite the Model Code of Conduct's provisions mandating disclosure of social media advertising expenditures by political parties and candidates, the Election Commission of India currently lacks specific guidelines or rules addressing the issue of deepfakes. While the ECI has established a social media cell to monitor online activities, disseminate information, and address complaints, questions remain regarding its capacity to effectively manage the evolving challenges posed by digital media in electoral processes.

Conclusion

The 2024 Indian Lok Sabha elections, characterised by their magnitude and significance, epitomise a pivotal moment in the nation's democratic trajectory. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi vying for a third term and engaging with an unprecedented 960 million eligible voters across seven phases, the electoral landscape undergoes a profound transformation, largely driven by the emergence of social media as a potent political tool. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerges as a frontrunner in capitalising on the digital realm, strategically harnessing platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate its message and mobilise supporters. The party's multifaceted approach involves leveraging diverse influencers and using effective methods to engage with grassroots communities, all while tailoring its content to resonate with specific voter segments, including women and youth. Collaborations with social media personalities further underscore the BJP's innovative strategies aimed at broadening its reach and shaping the electoral narrative.

In contrast, the Indian National Congress (INC), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) adopt distinct digital strategies, utilising platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube to communicate their respective agendas and engage with their

constituencies. Despite their efforts, challenges such as the proliferation of misinformation and deepfake videos loom large, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced regulatory mechanisms to safeguard electoral integrity in the digital age. As the electoral landscape continues to evolve, it becomes imperative for political actors to navigate the complexities of social media dynamics while upholding democratic principles and ensuring transparency. Through a concerted effort to engage with influencers and adapt to the evolving digital landscape, the BJP and other major parties aim to secure electoral success while confronting the challenges posed by misinformation and maintaining the integrity of the electoral process. Ultimately, the 2024 Indian Lok Sabha elections serve as a testament to the transformative power of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilising the citizenry in the world's largest democracy.

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