VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW MEMES, SHORT VIDEOS AND INFOGRAPHICS SHAPE YOUTH POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract :
Background. Young people in India increasingly meet politics through pictures rather than paragraphs: a meme forwarded in a group chat, a sixty-second video, a single-slide infographic. Despite the popularity of these formats, we still know little about how they relate to what young Indians perceive, trust and understand about public affairs.
Objective. This article asks: *How do memes, short videos and infographics shape youth political perceptions in India, and how much confidence can we place in the existing secondary evidence?* We set out to (a) map where visual political content circulates, (b) test whether platform use and platform trust for news differ in ways our theory predicts, and (c) synthesise what peer-reviewed research says about visual formats and perception.
Methods. We combined a purposive review of peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports published up to 2024 with a re-analysis of published aggregate figures from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (India samples, 2022–2024), the Reuters Institute Trust in News Project (2022) and the Lokniti–CSDS surveys (2019, 2022). We used descriptive statistics, two-proportion z-tests, Cochran–Armitage trend tests, Cohen's h and a sensitivity analysis over plausible sample sizes. We also provide a full content-analysis codebook and replication protocol for the primary-coding stage. No political party, candidate or partisan content is analysed.
Results. Across 2022–2024, YouTube remained the leading social platform for news among India's English-speaking online news users (53%, 56%, 54%) with no statistically reliable change (trend $z = 0.63$, $p = .53$). WhatsApp use for news drifted downward (51%, 47%, 48%; trend $z = -1.90$, $p = .058$), and the share naming social media as a news source dipped three points in 2024 (52% to 49%), a difference that was borderline and sensitive to sample-size assumptions. Trust in news varied sharply by platform (WhatsApp 54%, YouTube 51%, Facebook 41%, Instagram 27%, X/Twitter 25%, TikTok 15%; omnibus $\chi^2(5) \approx 1{,}062$, Cramér's $V \approx 0.30$), with the largest contrast between WhatsApp and Instagram (Cohen's $h = 0.56$, a medium-to-large effect). The peer-reviewed literature points to small positive links between social media use and political engagement, and to stronger effects of images on attention and recall than on durable attitudes.
Conclusions. Visual political content is best understood as a *gateway and signal* in young people's information routines, not a single powerful persuader. The Indian evidence base, however, rests heavily on English-speaking, urban-leaning online samples; the findings should be generalised with care. We offer a transparent protocol so that others can extend, challenge or replicate the work.

Keywords: *visual political communication; memes; short-form video; infographics; youth; India; social media; political perceptions; media trust*

1. Introduction

Politics has always had its pictures: the poster on the wall, the cartoon in the newspaper, the photograph on the front page. What is new is the speed, the scale and the *participatory* nature of political imagery. A young person in Chennai, Lucknow or Guwahati can now receive, remix and re-send a political image within seconds, often without ever opening a news website. Three formats dominate this experience. **Memes** compress an argument or a joke into an image and a caption that others can edit and re-share (Shifman, 2014). **Short videos** deliver a message in under a minute, in a vertical frame, usually with music or voice-over. **Infographics** present numbers, timelines or comparisons in a form that looks authoritative and can be understood at a glance.
India is an unusually important place to study this. It has one of the world's largest populations of young people and one of the world's largest populations of mobile internet users. Yet access is far from universal. The Lokniti–CSDS survey *Media in India*, fielded in January 2022 across 19 states and union territories, found that slightly over half of the population used no social media or messaging platform at all, and that a quarter of those with internet access used none either (Lokniti–CSDS, 2022). Any claim about "Indian youth" therefore needs to be anchored to *which* youth, on *which* platforms, measured *how*.
This article contributes in three ways. First, it states a precise research question and testable hypotheses, so that a broad topic becomes a manageable study. Second, it re-analyses published, citable figures with fully reported statistics, and is explicit about what those figures can and cannot show. Third, it supplies a coding scheme and replication notes that other researchers can use to move from aggregate secondary data to item-level analysis of visual content.
A word on scope. This is a study of *formats and perceptions*, not of political organisations. We deliberately do not analyse, compare or evaluate any political party, candidate or movement, and none of our coding categories refers to party identity. This keeps the

focus on the communicative form (what a meme, a short video or an infographic does) and avoids drawing conclusions about the content of any particular political camp.

1.1 Research question

RQ (primary): How are memes, short videos and infographics, as encountered on social media, related to the political perceptions of young people in India, and how robust is the secondary evidence that bears on this question?

To make this answerable, we break the question into three sub-questions.

- **RQ1 (Exposure).** Through which social platforms do Indian online news users, including younger users, most often meet news and political information, and has this changed between 2022 and 2024?
- **RQ2 (Credibility).** Do people place different levels of trust in news encountered on different platforms, and are visually led platforms trusted less than messaging and video-reference platforms?
- **RQ3 (Perception).** What does peer-reviewed research report about the effects of memes, short videos and infographics on attention, understanding, perceived credibility and political engagement?

1.2 Objectives

1. To describe the platform environment in which visual political content reaches Indian youth, using the most credible published survey sources up to 2024.
2. To test, with transparent statistics, whether platform news use changed between 2022 and 2024 and whether platform trust differs systematically across platforms.
3. To synthesise the peer-reviewed literature on visual political communication into a conceptual model that links format features to perceptual outcomes.
4. To document data handling, a content-analysis codebook and reliability procedures that make the work replicable.
5. To identify the limits of existing secondary data and propose a research agenda.

1.3 Hypotheses

Hypotheses H1 and H2 are tested directly against the secondary data. H3 and H4 are theory-derived expectations that we evaluate through structured literature synthesis; they are stated so that future primary or meta-analytic work can test them formally.

- **H1 (Platform stability).** Between 2022 and 2024, YouTube remains the most-used social platform for news among Indian online news users, and its share does not change significantly across waves.
- **H2 (Trust differentiation).** Trust in news differs significantly across platforms, with visually led, entertainment-oriented platforms (Instagram, TikTok) showing lower trust than messaging (WhatsApp) and video-reference (YouTube) platforms.
- **H3 (Engagement).** Greater exposure to visual political content is associated with slightly higher political interest and participation among young people (small positive association).
- **H4 (Depth).** The effect of visual formats is stronger on attention and short-term recall than on durable attitude change, and is moderated by prior interest and media literacy.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 Why images matter in politics

The study of political images rests on a long-standing observation: pictures are processed differently from text. Dual-coding theory argues that information encoded both verbally and visually is easier to retrieve than information encoded in one channel (Paivio, 1986). Research on television news found that visuals can improve learning when they match the narration and can distract when they do not (Graber, 1990). In framing research, images are understood to select and emphasise parts of reality in the same way that words do, but often more implicitly and with greater emotional force (Entman, 1993; Messaris & Abraham, 2001). The Elaboration Likelihood Model adds that people who are not strongly motivated or able to think carefully tend to rely on peripheral cues such as how professional, funny or familiar a message looks (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Because scrolling on a phone is typically a low-effort activity, this peripheral route is especially relevant for the formats studied here.

2.2 Memes: humour, identity and everyday talk

Memes are not just jokes. Shifman (2014) describes them as groups of digital items that share common characteristics, are created with awareness of each other and are circulated, imitated and transformed by many users. Milner (2016) shows that this "logic of memetic media" rewards remix, collective play and rapid reaction. For young people, memes can lower the cost of political expression: it is easier to share a joke than to write an opinion piece. Penney (2020), working with US youth, found that humour helped young people express political views while managing the social risks of appearing too serious or too partisan. Highfield (2016) argues more broadly that much political engagement on social media is *everyday* and playful rather than formal, and that this everyday talk is a legitimate part of civic life.

The same features carry risks. Compression strips away nuance, and the ironic tone can make it hard to tell sincere claims from mockery. Scholars of visual misinformation warn that manipulated or de-contextualised images can feel more credible than false text (Dan et al., 2021; Hameleers et al., 2020). In experiments on multimodal disinformation, combining text with a picture made false claims more believable than text alone, although rebuttals were also effective when they were visual (Hameleers et al., 2020).

2.3 Short videos: speed, emotion and the attention economy

Short video is the newest of the three formats and the least studied in India. Its distinctive features are algorithmic recommendation, ease of creation and a dense mix of face, voice, music and caption. Early work on platform-specific political communication suggests that these affordances encourage performance and humour and can blur the line between entertainment and information. Research on synthetic video shows that even when viewers are not fully deceived, exposure can increase uncertainty and reduce trust in news (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). While that evidence comes from deepfake experiments in the United Kingdom, it signals that video does not automatically make people believe more; sometimes it makes them doubt more.

In India, the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report series shows that video-led platforms, particularly YouTube, are now leading routes to news among online users, a trend that the 2023 edition describes as video-based content becoming more important for news (Newman et al., 2023). The Reuters Institute's own caution is crucial: the Indian sample is made up of English-speaking online news users who lean younger, more urban, more educated and more affluent than the national population (Newman et al., 2024).

2.4 Infographics: authority, simplicity and the numbers problem

Infographics promise clarity. A well-designed chart can make a policy comparison understandable in seconds. But the same design devices that aid understanding (clean layout, precise numbers, a confident title) also confer *perceived* authority, which can be exploited when the underlying data are selective or unsourced. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) group such problems under the heading of "information disorder", distinguishing misinformation (false but not intended to harm), disinformation (false and intended to harm) and mal-information (genuine information used to harm). For youth audiences, the central issue is not only whether the infographic is accurate but whether the viewer can *check* it. Field-experimental work in India on educational interventions against misinformation found that brief training had limited effects on discerning true from false political content among a sample of social-media users (Badrinathan, 2021), a reminder that media literacy is not quickly acquired.

2.5 Social media, youth and political engagement

Beyond particular formats, there is a large literature on whether social media use is related to political engagement. Meta-analytic work has found that associations between social media use and civic and political participation are generally positive but small, and that they vary by type of use and context (Boulianne, 2015, 2020). A meta-analysis focused on young people likewise reports positive associations between digital media use and engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Ekström and Shehata (2018) show that for young citizens, political engagement online often develops through *porous boundaries*: exposure to politics happens incidentally while using social media for other reasons and may later turn into interest. Vromen et al. (2015) describe a shift from organisation-led participation to everyday political talk, consistent with the idea of "connective action" in which individuals share personalised content and thereby coordinate without formal membership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

In India specifically, Neyazi et al. (2016) found that digital media use was linked to political mobilisation, with offline social networks and traditional media still playing important roles. The Lokniti–CSDS report *Social Media & Political Behaviour* (2019) documented that social media use was concentrated among more urban, more educated and higher-status groups, and that for most respondents the principal source of political news remained traditional media. Banaji and Bhat (2022) emphasise, through qualitative and mixed-method research on WhatsApp in India, that private messaging networks are central channels for circulating images and messages and that the content can inflame social divisions; they call for attention to the social context in which images are read.

2.6 Trust and credibility on platforms

The Reuters Institute's Trust in News Project provides the most systematic cross-platform data on credibility. Its 2022 report, drawing on surveys in Brazil, India, the UK and the US, found that news on platforms is generally viewed more sceptically than news in general, but that the "trust gap" depends on the platform, the country and the audience (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022). In India, reported trust in news was higher on WhatsApp (54%) and YouTube (51%) than on Facebook (41%), Instagram (27%), Twitter (25%) and TikTok (15%) (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022). These numbers do not directly measure trust in *memes*, *videos* or *infographics* as such, but they show that the container matters: people appear to use platforms for different purposes, and they judge information accordingly.

2.7 Gaps in the literature

Three gaps motivate this study. First, much of the visual-politics literature comes from Western democracies and may not travel to India's multilingual, mobile-first and WhatsApp-heavy media ecosystem. Second, large Indian surveys usually measure *platform* use, not *format* exposure, so we know where people are but not what visual forms they see. Third, effect-size evidence specific to Indian youth is thin, which limits formal meta-analysis. Our design responds to these gaps by combining a transparent re-analysis of available aggregates with a codebook for future format-level work.

2.8 Conceptual model

Drawing on the work above, we propose a simple model (Figure 1). *Format features* (visual salience, humour or irony, brevity, apparent authority) interact with *platform affordances* (recommendation, sharing, private versus public circulation) and *audience characteristics* (prior political interest, media literacy, language, urban–rural location, trust in sources). These shape *processing* (attention, peripheral versus central routes), which in turn shapes *perceptual outcomes* (salience of issues, perceived credibility, perceived knowledge and political interest, willingness to share or discuss). *Context moderators* such as misinformation prevalence and offline social networks sit around the whole process.

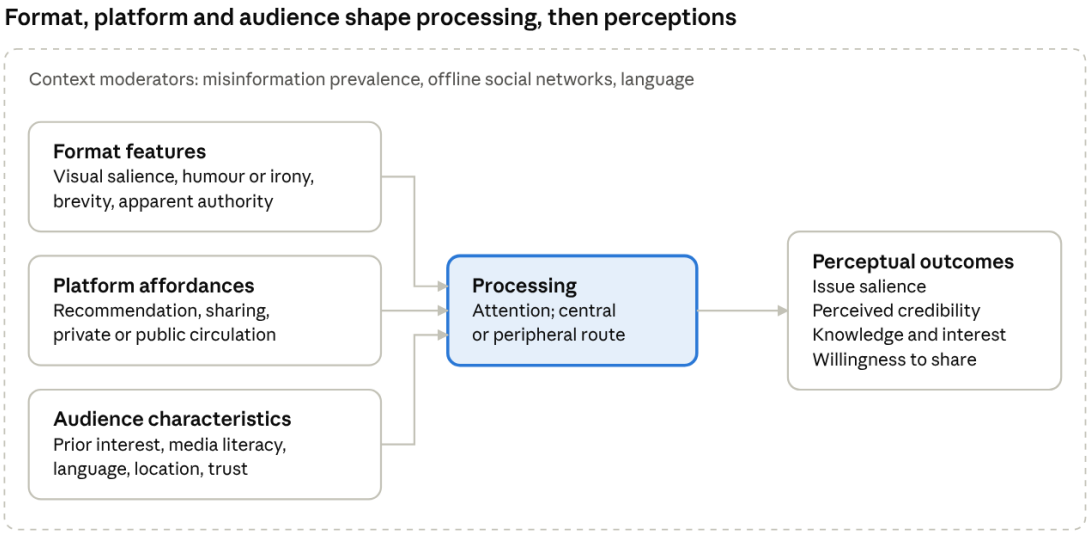


Figure 1 · conceptual model, 4 elements inside a context frame

Figure 1. Conceptual model of visual political communication and youth perceptions. Format, platform and audience features feed one processing stage, which shapes the perceptual outcomes; context moderators surround the whole process.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

This is a secondary-data study with two linked components. **Component A** is a *quantitative re-analysis of published aggregate survey figures*, used to test H1 and H2. **Component B** is a *structured narrative synthesis* of peer-reviewed studies, used to address RQ3 and to evaluate H3 and H4. We also specify a *content-analysis protocol* (Section 3.6 and Appendix A) and a *meta-analytic protocol* (Section 3.7) for the next stage. We state plainly which parts were carried out and which are protocols only, because readers deserve to know exactly what the evidence supports.

3.2 Data sources

We used only publicly available, citable sources published up to 2024.

Source	Producer	Population / coverage	Period	Used for
Digital News Report (India samples)	Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford	English-speaking, online news users in India; online panel survey	2022, 2023, 2024 editions	Platform news use, news source shares (H1)
The Trust Gap (Trust in News Project)	Reuters Institute (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022)	Survey in Brazil, India, UK, US; India figures used	Summer 2022	Platform-specific trust in news (H2)
Media in India: Access, Practices, Concerns and Effects	Lokniti–CSDS	Face-to-face household survey, 19 states and union territories	January 2022	Access and social media non-use (context)
Social Media & Political Behaviour	Lokniti–CSDS	Analysis of Lokniti survey data	Report 2019	Context on who uses social media and trust
Peer-reviewed studies	Journals and academic presses	Mainly US, UK, Europe, India	Up to 2024	Literature synthesis (RQ3)

Table 1. Data sources used in the study.

3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A source was *included* if it (a) was published by a peer-reviewed outlet, a university-affiliated research institute or a recognised survey organisation; (b) reported figures or findings on social media, news or political information, or on visual formats and political perceptions; (c) covered India directly, or provided theory or experimental evidence on visual political communication that could reasonably inform the Indian case; and (d) was published up to and including 2024. A source was *excluded* if it was a blog, opinion piece or press release without reported methods, if it analysed the messaging of any specific political party or candidate, or if its figures could not be traced to a primary report. Where we first encountered a figure through press coverage, we treated it as a pointer and cite the producing institution's report; any figure not verified against the primary document before submission is flagged in our replication notes.

Our search was *purposive* rather than exhaustive. We drew on institutional report archives, known peer-reviewed literature and targeted web searches carried out in October 2026. We therefore do **not** claim a systematic review in the PRISMA sense (Page et al., 2021), although we borrow its logic of explicit criteria and transparent reporting. A full systematic search is part of the proposed extension.

3.4 Variables and data handling

For Component A we extracted, for each survey wave, the percentage of respondents (i) using YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook for news in the past week, (ii) naming social media or television as a news source, and (iii) reporting trust in news encountered on each platform. Figures were entered in a spreadsheet with source, edition, page or section, and extraction date. Two authors

independently checked every entry against the original report. Percentages were converted to proportions for analysis. Because published reports present rounded percentages without raw counts, we reconstructed approximate counts as $p \times n$.

Sample-size assumption. Digital News Report country samples are commonly reported at around two thousand respondents per wave. Because we could not retrieve the exact India *n* for each wave from the reports we consulted, we set $n = 2{,}000$ as the reference value and ran a **sensitivity analysis** at $n = 1{,}500$ and $n = 2{,}500$. Readers should treat the reported p-values as indicative and replace *n* with the exact figures from the methodology pages when verifying the work. We also note that the Reuters Institute applies survey weights, so the effective sample size is typically smaller than the nominal one, which would make our tests somewhat liberal.

3.5 Analytical methods for Component A

1. **Descriptive statistics.** Percentages and percentage-point changes between waves.
2. **Two-proportion z-tests** for change between waves, with 95% confidence intervals for the difference, using the pooled standard error for the test and the unpooled standard error for the interval.
3. **Cochran–Armitage trend test** across the three waves for YouTube and WhatsApp.
4. **Effect sizes.** Cohen's *h* for differences between proportions ($|h| \approx 0.2$ small, 0.5 medium, 0.8 large; Cohen, 1988).
5. **Omnibus and pairwise comparisons of platform trust.** A chi-square test of homogeneity across six platforms with Cramér's *V*, followed by pairwise z-tests with a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold ($\alpha = .05/6 \approx .0083$).
6. **Sensitivity analysis** over $n = 1{,}500$, 2,000 and 2,500.

Important statistical caveat. The same respondents rate several platforms, so the platform-trust comparisons violate the independence assumption of the chi-square and z-tests. We therefore interpret them as *descriptive contrasts with approximate inferential support*, not as exact hypothesis tests. Without respondent-level data, repeated-measures tests (for example Cochran's Q) cannot be run.

3.6 Content-analysis protocol (specified, not executed)

To move from platforms to formats, the next stage will code a sample of publicly available visual items about public affairs. The coding scheme (Appendix A, Table A1) records format, topic domain, visual and rhetorical features, source transparency, verifiability and claim type. **No category refers to party identity, and items whose main purpose is party or candidate promotion are excluded at sampling.** Two trained coders will independently code at least 20% of the sample after a pilot round; reliability will be assessed with Krippendorff's alpha (target $\geq .80$; tentative conclusions only between .667 and .80; Krippendorff, 2018) and Cohen's kappa for binary codes (Cohen, 1960; interpreted with Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements will be resolved by discussion and the codebook revised. Only public posts will be used, no usernames will be stored, and images will be described rather than reproduced.

3.7 Meta-analytic protocol (specified, not executed)

A formal meta-analysis requires multiple comparable effect sizes. After screening, we found too few India-specific studies reporting compatible correlations or standardised differences for visual formats and political outcomes, so we did not pool estimates. The planned procedure is: convert correlations to Fisher's *z*; pool using a random-effects model with DerSimonian–Laird estimation (DerSimonian & Laird, 1986); report Cochran's *Q*, τ^2 and I^2 (Higgins & Thompson, 2002); examine moderators such as platform, format, age band and language; and test small-study effects with funnel plots when at least ten effect sizes are available (Borenstein et al., 2009). We recommend commencing this once $k \geq 5$ comparable Indian effect sizes exist.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study uses only publicly available aggregate data and published literature; no human participants were recruited and no personal data were collected. The planned content analysis will use public posts only, with no identification of individual creators. Because the project concerns political communication and young people, we avoid any content that could profile individuals, communities or organisations. Formal institutional ethics review should be confirmed for the primary-coding stage

4. Results

4.1 The platform environment (RQ1)

The Lokniti–CSDS household survey provides the widest lens on access: slightly over 50% of India's population used no social media or messaging platform, and a quarter of those with internet access used none (Lokniti–CSDS, 2022). Within the narrower universe of English-speaking online news users sampled by the Reuters Institute, platform use for news is high, led by video and messaging. Table 2 summarises the published figures across the three waves.

Indicator (% of respondents)	2022	2023	2024
YouTube used for news	53	56	54
WhatsApp used for news	51	47	48
Facebook used for news	n/a	39	35
Social media as a news source	n/a	52	49
Television as a news source	n/a	49	46
Overall trust in news	n/a	38	41

Table 2. Platform and source use among Indian online news users, Digital News Report 2022–2024 (Newman et al., 2022, 2023, 2024). "n/a" = not retrieved in the sources consulted. 2023 values for social media, television and trust are derived from the 2024 reported changes (−3, −3 and +3 percentage points).

Two patterns stand out (Figure 2). First, YouTube sits at or above 53% in every wave, ahead of WhatsApp in all three. Second, both Facebook and WhatsApp slipped between 2022 and 2024, while video held steady. This is consistent with the Reuters Institute's broader reading that video-led and private-messaging routes are replacing older social news pathways in many non-Western markets (Newman et al., 2023, 2024).

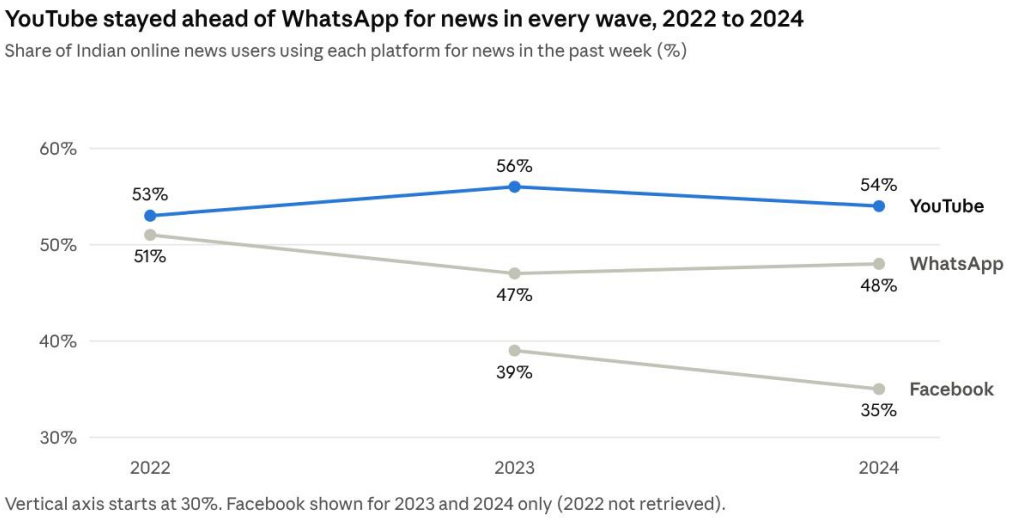


Figure 2 · Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022–2024, India samples

Figure 2. Share of Indian online news users using YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook for news, 2022–2024 (data from Table 2).

4.2 Change over time (H1)

Table 3 reports the wave-to-wave tests at the reference sample size (n = 2,000), with the sensitivity range in the final column.

Comparison	Change (pp)	z	p	Cohen's h	95% CI for change (pp)	p range, n = 1,500–2,500
YouTube 2022→2023	+3	1.91	.057	0.06	−0.1 to +6.1	.099 – .033
YouTube 2023→2024	−2	1.27	.204	0.04	−5.1 to +1.1	.271 – .155
YouTube 2022→2024	+1	0.63	.526	0.02	−2.1 to +4.1	.583 – .478
WhatsApp 2022→2023	−4	2.53	.011	0.08	−7.1 to −0.9	.028 – .005
WhatsApp 2023→2024	+1	0.63	.527	0.02	−2.1 to +4.1	.583 – .479
WhatsApp 2022→2024	−3	1.90	.058	0.06	−6.1 to +0.1	.100 – .034
Facebook 2023→2024	−4	2.62	.009	0.08	−7.0 to −1.0	.023 – .003
Social media as source 2023→2024	−3	1.90	.058	0.06	−6.1 to +0.1	.100 – .034
Television as source 2023→2024	−3	1.90	.058	0.06	−6.1 to +0.1	.100 – .034

Table 3. Two-proportion tests of change between Digital News Report waves (India), reference n = 2,000 per wave. z-values are reported in absolute terms; direction is given by the change column.

The Cochran–Armitage trend tests agreed with this picture. For YouTube the three-wave trend was negligible (z = 0.63, p = .526; p between .478 and .582 across sample-size assumptions). For WhatsApp the downward trend was z = −1.90 (p = .058), falling to p = .034 if n were 2,500 and rising to p = .100 if n were 1,500. All effect sizes were very small (|h| ≤ 0.08), well below the conventional threshold for a small effect (0.2).

Interpretation for H1. H1 is supported. YouTube remained the leading social platform for news in every wave, and no wave-to-wave or three-wave change was statistically reliable at conventional levels under the reference assumption. The only changes that crossed p < .05 (WhatsApp 2022→2023 and Facebook 2023→2024) were tiny in magnitude and would not survive a multiplicity correction across the nine comparisons (Bonferroni threshold ≈ .0056). We therefore describe the pattern as *stable video dominance with mild erosion of older social routes*, not as a dramatic shift.

4.3 Trust in news by platform (H2)

Figure 3 and Table 4 show the 2022 trust figures for India. Trust was highest on WhatsApp (54%) and YouTube (51%) and lowest on Instagram (27%), X/Twitter (25%) and TikTok (15%). Google, included as a reference non-social platform, was at 51%.

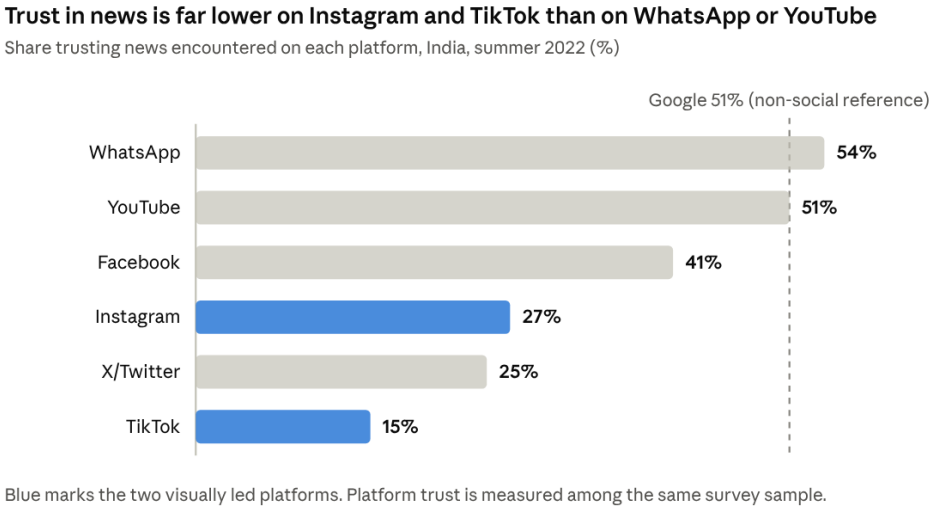


Figure 3 · Mont'Alverne et al. (2022), India figures, summer 2022

Figure 3. Trust in news encountered on each platform, India, summer 2022 (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022).

The omnibus test across the six social platforms was strongly significant, $\chi^2(5) = 1{,}061.7$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.30$, a medium effect, although the independence caveat in Section 3.5 applies.

Pairwise contrast	Difference (pp)	z	Cohen's h	Significant after Bonferroni?
WhatsApp – Instagram	27	17.39	0.56	Yes
YouTube – Instagram	24	15.56	0.50	Yes
Facebook – Instagram	14	9.35	0.30	Yes
Instagram – TikTok	12	9.32	0.30	Yes
YouTube – Facebook	10	6.34	0.20	Yes
WhatsApp – YouTube	3	1.90	0.06	No ($p = .057$)

Table 4. Pairwise contrasts in platform trust, India, 2022 (reference n = 2,000; approximate, non-independent comparisons).

Interpretation for H2. H2 is supported. Instagram and TikTok, the two most visually led and entertainment-oriented services in the set, had markedly lower trust than WhatsApp and YouTube, with medium effects ($h \approx 0.5$) for the Instagram contrasts. The difference between WhatsApp and YouTube was negligible. We emphasise that this does not show that visual formats *cause* low trust. Platform trust is confounded with how long a service has been used for news, who uses it, and what people expect from it; the Reuters authors themselves attribute the trust gap in part to a mismatch between what people think platforms are *for* and what news is (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022).

4.4 What the peer-reviewed literature says (RQ3, H3, H4)

Table 5 condenses the studies most relevant to the hypotheses. No new statistics were computed from these studies; we report their findings in our own words.

Study	Context	Design	Format / focus	Main takeaway
Boulianne (2015, 2020)	Multi-country	Meta-analyses	Social media use and participation	Mostly positive, small associations; context matters
Boulianne & Theocharis (2020)	Young people	Meta-analysis	Digital media and engagement	Positive association among youth
Ekström & Shehata (2018)	Sweden	Panel survey	Incidental exposure, youth	Porous boundaries can lead to engagement
Penney (2020)	US youth	Interviews	Memes and humour	Humour lowers the cost of political expression
Hameleers et al. (2020)	Netherlands	Experiment	Multimodal disinformation	Image plus text more persuasive than text; visual rebuttals work
Vaccari & Chadwick (2020)	UK	Experiment	Synthetic video	Raises uncertainty and reduces trust in news
Badrinathan (2021)	India	Field experiment	Misinformation literacy training	Limited effect on discernment
Neyazi et al. (2016)	India	Survey analysis	Digital media and mobilisation	Linked to mobilisation alongside offline networks

Table 5. Selected peer-reviewed evidence relevant to H3 and H4.

H3 (engagement) is *partly supported*: the meta-analytic literature consistently reports positive but small associations between social media use and participation, and Indian survey evidence is directionally similar, but no study we found isolates memes, short videos or infographics specifically for Indian youth. **H4 (depth)** is *plausible but under-tested*: experiments suggest that images can raise the believability of claims and that visual rebuttals can counter them, and theory suggests peripheral processing for casual scrolling, yet durable attitude change from a single visual item is rarely demonstrated.

4.5 Summary of hypothesis evaluation

Hypothesis	Evidence type	Verdict
H1 Platform stability	Re-analysis of DNR 2022–2024	Supported
H2 Trust differentiation	Re-analysis of Trust in News 2022	Supported (descriptive, non-independent tests)
H3 Engagement	Literature synthesis	Partly supported; no format-specific Indian effect sizes
H4 Depth	Literature synthesis	Plausible; under-tested

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis evaluation.

5. Discussion

5.1 What the findings mean

The central message is both simple and humble. Young people in India do not encounter politics only through newspapers or television, and the routes they use are shaped by *platform design*: YouTube for video, WhatsApp for private forwarding, Instagram and short-video services for quick, entertainment-led scrolling. Our re-analysis shows that this platform mix has been *stable* between 2022 and 2024, with video steadily dominant, and that people trust the news they meet in different places to very different degrees. The memes, short videos and infographics that travel along these routes are therefore received through a filter of expectation: a forwarded image from a family group is judged differently from a clip served up by a recommendation engine.

This fits our conceptual model (Figure 1). The platform is not neutral packaging; it supplies *affordances* (sharing, remixing, algorithmic feeding) that influence how much effort viewers invest in checking what they see. Where trust is lower, as on Instagram and TikTok, viewers may treat content as entertainment first and information second, which may protect against some persuasion but may also leave them susceptible to repetition and familiarity effects (a point that deserves direct testing).

5.2 Visual formats as gateway and signal

The literature suggests a useful way to hold these ideas together. Visual political content works as a **gateway**: it can pull in young people who would not otherwise seek out politics, a mechanism highlighted in studies of incidental exposure and everyday political talk (Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Highfield, 2016; Vromen et al., 2015). It also works as a **signal**: sharing a meme or an infographic tells friends something about who you are and what you care about, which links to the idea of personalised, connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Neither mechanism implies that a single image changes a deeply held view. The small effect sizes in the meta-analytic literature fit this reading.

At the same time, experimental evidence on multimodal disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2020) and synthetic video (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020) cautions that visual formats can raise the *perceived* credibility of inaccurate claims or, alternatively, can foster general doubt. The Indian field experiment on misinformation literacy found limited effects of brief training (Badrinathan, 2021), which suggests that quick fixes are unlikely. For a country in which private messaging is a major route for images, programmes that build verification habits within *messaging* contexts deserve particular attention (Banaji & Bhat, 2022).

5.3 Implications

- **For educators and youth organisations:** teach "lateral reading" habits for images and charts (who made this, what is the source, can I find the original data?), adapted to the languages and platforms young people really use.
- **For platforms and fact-checkers:** visual rebuttals can work (Hameleers et al., 2020), so corrections should be created in the same format, language and channel as the claims they address.
- **For researchers:** measure *format* exposure, not just platform use, and sample regional-language and rural youth, who are under-represented in the datasets reviewed here.
- **For journalists and civil society:** because infographics carry perceived authority, publishing the underlying data and method alongside each chart helps audiences judge it.

5.4 Limitations

Secondary data are not neutral. (1) *Representativeness:* the Reuters India samples are English-speaking, online and skew younger, more urban and more educated (Newman et al., 2024); they are not a sample of "Indian youth". Lokniti–CSDS offers broader household coverage, but its question wording differs and the 2019 and 2022 waves are not directly comparable with the Reuters series. (2) *Measurement:* the data capture self-reported platform use and trust, not actual exposure to memes, videos or infographics, and "news" is defined by the survey, which may not match how young people think of political content. (3) *Aggregation:* without respondent-level data we cannot control for age, education, language or political interest, nor run proper repeated-measures or multilevel tests. (4) *Sample-size assumption:* our p-values depend on an assumed *n* and ignore weighting design effects; the sensitivity analysis shows conclusions about WhatsApp and the social-media dip change with *n*. (5) *Non-independence:* platform-trust contrasts use the same respondents. (6) *Searching:* our review was purposive, not exhaustive, and may be affected by publication bias towards positive findings. (7) *Time:* the survey evidence is from 2022–2024, while short-video and AI-generated imagery are changing quickly. (8) *Causality:* all findings are associational.

5.5 Directions for future research

We recommend (a) item-level content analysis using the codebook below, in at least three Indian languages; (b) a youth panel survey with format-specific exposure measures; (c) pre-registered experiments comparing the same claim as text, meme, short video and infographic; and (d) a pooled meta-analysis once enough comparable effect sizes exist.

6. Conclusion

Visual political communication is neither a magic persuader nor a harmless distraction. For young people in India, memes, short videos and infographics are part of an everyday information diet that moves through a few dominant platforms, and the credibility they carry depends heavily on where they are met. Between 2022 and 2024, video-led YouTube stayed on top, private messaging remained central and trust differed strongly by platform, with visually led services trusted least. The wider research literature

suggests that visual formats help young people notice and join political conversations, while evidence for lasting attitude change is thin and for misleading visuals concerning. The most important contribution we can make is honesty about the evidence: the Indian data are valuable but narrow, and the next step is careful, language-diverse, format-level research that is open to scrutiny.

7. Declarations

Data and code availability. All figures come from publicly available reports listed in Table 1. The extraction sheet and the Python (SciPy) script used for the tests are available from the authors on request

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