

POLITAINMENT IN DIGITAL POLITICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR VOTER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media has fundamentally transformed political communication, enabling new forms of interaction between political actors and citizens. Within this evolving landscape, *politainment*—the convergence of politics and entertainment—has emerged as a dominant mode of disseminating political information, particularly among digitally connected audiences. While politainment has increased the accessibility and visibility of political content, concerns remain regarding its implications for democratic discourse, political polarization, and voter behaviour.

Objective: This study aims to examine the role of politainment in digital politics and synthesize existing evidence on its influence on voter engagement, political participation, and democratic processes.

Method: A narrative literature review was conducted by examining recent scholarly publications on digital politics, social media, politainment, political communication, and voter engagement. The reviewed studies were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, emerging trends, opportunities, and challenges associated with the integration of entertainment into political communication.

Major Findings: The review indicates that social media platforms have significantly expanded opportunities for political participation by facilitating real-time communication, information dissemination, and civic engagement, particularly among young people and marginalized communities. Politainment has enhanced the visibility and accessibility of political information, contributing to increased public interest and political participation. However, the findings also highlight important challenges, including the spread of misinformation, political polarization, algorithm-driven content personalization, voter manipulation, and the trivialization of substantive political discourse. These factors collectively influence political attitudes, voting behaviour, and the overall quality of democratic engagement.

Conclusion: Politainment represents a significant transformation in contemporary political communication by reshaping how citizens consume, interpret, and engage with political information. Although it offers considerable opportunities to broaden political participation, its associated risks necessitate stronger regulatory frameworks, improved media literacy, and responsible digital communication strategies. Balancing entertainment with informed political discourse is essential to strengthening democratic participation and preserving the integrity of electoral processes in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Politainment; digital politics; social media; voter engagement; political communication; democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed political communication, civic participation, and democratic engagement. The widespread adoption of the internet and social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has enabled political actors to communicate directly with citizens, disseminate campaign messages, mobilize supporters, and influence public opinion in real time. Unlike traditional mass media, digital platforms facilitate interactive communication by allowing citizens not only to consume political information but also to create, share, and discuss political content. Consequently, digital politics has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary democracies, reshaping the relationship between political institutions and the electorate (Lindner & Aichholzer, 2020; Theocharis et al., 2023).

A notable development within digital politics is the emergence of politainment, which refers to the integration of political information with entertainment-oriented content to increase audience attention and engagement. Through memes, satire, influencer content, livestreams, short-form videos, and other digital media formats, political messages are increasingly presented in ways that are engaging and easily consumable. Although politainment enhances the accessibility and visibility of political information, it also blurs the boundary between informative political discourse and entertainment, raising concerns regarding the quality of public debate and democratic deliberation (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Gómez-García et al., 2023; Radošinská et al., 2021).

The growing influence of social media has made politainment an increasingly important factor in shaping voter engagement, particularly among younger generations and digitally connected citizens. Social media platforms have expanded opportunities for political participation by facilitating political discussion, information sharing, and civic mobilization, especially among youth and marginalized communities (**Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023; Kahne & Bowyer, 2019; Theocharis et al., 2023**). At the same time, digital political communication has introduced significant challenges, including misinformation, political polarization, algorithm-driven personalization, voter manipulation, and the oversimplification of complex political issues (**Neyazi, 2020; Burkell & Regan, 2019; Echeverría, 2023**). These developments have generated increasing scholarly interest in understanding how entertainment-based political communication shapes political attitudes, voting behaviour, and democratic outcomes.

Although previous studies have extensively examined digital politics, social media, political participation, and political communication, the existing literature remains fragmented. Most studies investigate these phenomena independently, focusing on specific aspects such as social media engagement, political branding, digital campaigning, or misinformation (**Elareshi et al., 2021; Al-Hasan et al., 2021; Jain & BE, 2020**). Comparatively fewer studies provide a comprehensive synthesis of how politainment simultaneously influences voter engagement, political participation, and the quality of democratic discourse within the broader digital political ecosystem. Addressing this gap is important because understanding the combined effects of entertainment-driven political communication can provide valuable insights for policymakers, political communicators, educators, and researchers seeking to strengthen democratic participation in the digital age.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of politainment in digital politics through a narrative review of the existing literature. Specifically, it synthesizes current evidence on how politainment influences voter engagement, political participation, and democratic processes while identifying the opportunities, challenges, and future directions for political communication in an increasingly digital society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Digital Politics

Digital politics has transformed political communication by shifting interactions between political actors and citizens from traditional mass media to interactive digital platforms. Unlike conventional media, social media facilitate bidirectional communication, enabling citizens to actively participate in political discussions, share information, and mobilize collective action. **Lindner and Aichholzer (2020)** argue that digital technologies have strengthened e-democracy by expanding opportunities for public participation, while **Theocharis et al. (2023)** demonstrate that platform-specific affordances influence different forms of political engagement. Similarly, **Boulianne (2020)** concludes that digital media have consistently increased civic and political participation over the past two decades.

Despite this consensus, scholars differ regarding the extent to which digital politics enhances democratic participation. Whereas **Aichholzer and Rose (2020)** emphasize the participatory potential of digital tools, **Neyazi (2020)** argues that the same technologies facilitate political propaganda, automated bot activity, and ideological polarization. These contrasting findings suggest that the democratic impact of digital politics depends not only on technological affordances but also on political institutions, regulatory frameworks, and patterns of platform use.

Politainment as Political Communication

The convergence of politics and entertainment has given rise to politainment as a dominant mode of digital political communication. Entertainment-oriented formats—including memes, satire, livestreams, influencer content, and short-form videos—have become increasingly important in disseminating political information. **Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2023)** and **Gómez-García et al. (2023)** argue that politainment increases the visibility and accessibility of political messages, particularly among audiences that traditionally exhibit low levels of political interest. Likewise, **Roca-Trenchs et al. (2024)** demonstrate that platforms such as Twitch provide innovative spaces for political interaction with younger audiences.

Although scholars generally acknowledge the communication advantages of politainment, they disagree regarding its broader democratic consequences. **Radošinská et al. (2021)** contend that entertainment-based political communication risks trivializing complex political issues and reducing substantive debate, whereas **Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2023)** suggest that entertainment formats can serve as gateways that encourage political awareness and participation. These divergent findings indicate that the effectiveness of politainment depends on whether entertainment complements or replaces substantive political information.

Social Media and Political Participation

A substantial body of research demonstrates that social media have expanded opportunities for political participation by facilitating information sharing, civic discussion, and electoral mobilization. Studies among young people and marginalized communities consistently report that digital platforms lower barriers to political engagement by providing accessible channels for communication and participation (**Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023; Alodat et al., 2023**). Furthermore, **Al-Hasan et al. (2021)** found that exposure to diverse online political information positively influences voting participation and political awareness.

However, the literature also reveals important limitations. **Elareshi et al. (2021)** observed that many politicians continue to use social media primarily for self-promotion rather than meaningful interaction with citizens. Similarly, **Bright et al. (2020)** found that although social media campaigning contributes to electoral success, its effects remain relatively modest. Collectively, these studies suggest that social media alone cannot guarantee meaningful democratic participation; rather, the quality of political communication determines whether digital engagement translates into informed political behaviour.

Youth Engagement in Digital Politics

Young people constitute one of the most active groups in digital political participation because they rely heavily on social media as their primary source of political information. Kahne and **Bowyer (2019)** argue that media literacy education significantly enhances young people's capacity to participate in democratic processes. Likewise, **Ohme (2019)** demonstrates that first-time voters who engage with political content on social media are more likely to participate in election campaigns and political discussions. **Marquart et al. (2020)** further report that following politicians on social media increases exposure to political information through both political actors and peer networks.

Despite broad agreement regarding the importance of digital media for youth engagement, scholars acknowledge persistent inequalities. **Schäfer et al. (2020)** argue that socioeconomic factors continue to influence first-time voting behaviour, while **Lee and Xenos (2019)** demonstrate that non-political social media use may reduce political knowledge through information overload and incidental exposure. These findings indicate that digital participation among young citizens is influenced not only by platform access but also by digital literacy and patterns of media consumption.

Algorithmic Personalization and Political Communication

Recent studies have increasingly focused on algorithmic personalization and individualized political communication. Personalized political content allows campaigns to target specific audiences based on demographic characteristics and online behaviour, thereby increasing communication efficiency. **Paatelainen et al. (2024)** argue that personalized political communication is now evident across both traditional and social media environments. Similarly, **Jain and BE (2020)** highlight the importance of credibility, branding, and personalized communication in strengthening political leadership.

Nevertheless, concerns regarding algorithmic personalization remain substantial. **Burkell and Regan (2019)** warn that personalized political messaging may undermine voter autonomy by enabling behavioural manipulation and excessive surveillance. Consequently, while personalization may improve political communication efficiency, it simultaneously raises ethical concerns regarding privacy, transparency, and democratic accountability.

Misinformation, Polarization, and Democratic Challenges

Although digital platforms have expanded access to political information, they have also facilitated the rapid dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and polarized political narratives. **Neyazi (2020)** demonstrates that digital propaganda and political bots contribute significantly to political polarization within hybrid media systems. Similarly, **Echeverria (2023)** argues that social media algorithms frequently expose users to emotionally engaging political content, increasing selective exposure and ideological reinforcement.

Most scholars agree that misinformation threatens informed democratic participation. However, there is less consensus regarding appropriate responses. While some advocate stronger regulatory oversight of digital platforms (**Burkell & Regan, 2019**), others emphasize media literacy and critical digital citizenship as more sustainable long-term solutions (**Kahne & Bowyer, 2019**). These contrasting perspectives indicate that addressing misinformation requires coordinated efforts involving governments, educational institutions, technology companies, and civil society.

Democratic Implications

The literature consistently demonstrates that digital politics has transformed democratic participation by increasing opportunities for political communication, civic engagement, and citizen mobilization. Digital platforms have enabled greater inclusion of previously underrepresented groups and expanded access to political information. Nevertheless, the same technologies have intensified concerns regarding misinformation, polarization, algorithmic manipulation, and declining deliberative quality.

Scholars agree that digital politics offers significant democratic opportunities but disagree regarding whether its benefits outweigh its risks. This divergence largely reflects differences in political contexts, platform characteristics, methodological approaches, and measures of political engagement. Future research should therefore adopt comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to better understand how digital political communication can promote informed and inclusive democratic participation while minimizing its unintended consequences.

RESEARCH GAP

Although numerous studies have examined digital political communication, social media engagement, political participation, and voter behaviour independently, comparatively limited research has synthesized how politainment simultaneously influences political participation, voter engagement, and the quality of democratic

discourse. Existing studies often focus on individual platforms, specific elections, or isolated dimensions of digital political communication, resulting in fragmented evidence. Consequently, there remains a need for an integrated review that critically examines the interconnected roles of digital politics, social media, politainment, algorithmic personalization, and democratic participation. This narrative review addresses this gap by synthesizing findings across these domains to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and future directions of politainment in contemporary digital politics.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

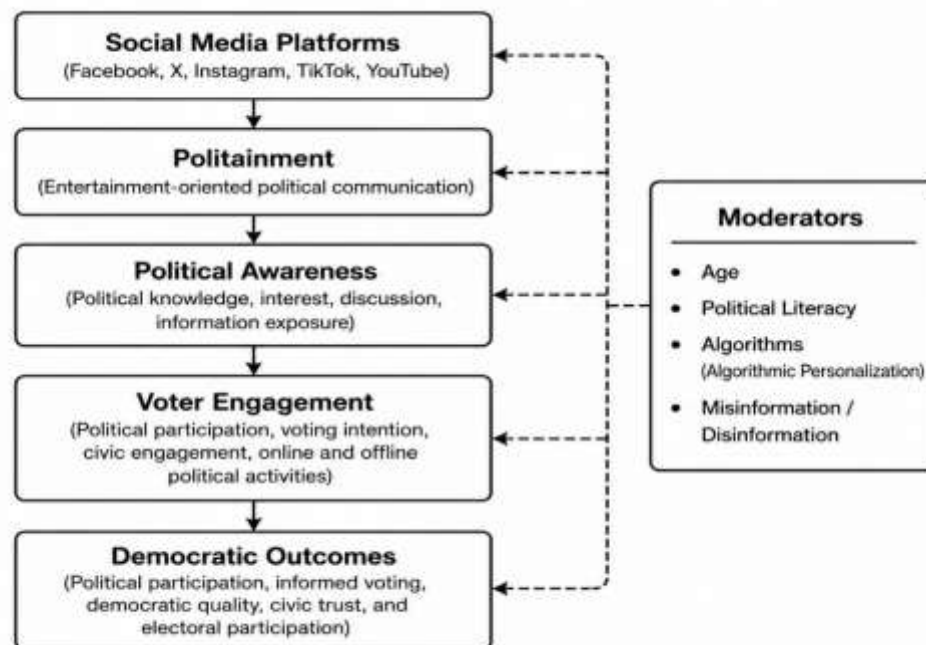


Figure 1 : CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE STUDY

The proposed conceptual framework illustrates the theoretical relationships among social media platforms, politainment, political awareness, voter engagement, and democratic outcomes. Social media platforms serve as the primary digital environment through which political information is created, disseminated, and consumed. Within this environment, politainment functions as an important communication mechanism by integrating entertainment elements with political content, thereby increasing the visibility, accessibility, and appeal of political messages (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Gómez-García et al., 2023). Exposure to politainment is expected to enhance political awareness by increasing political knowledge, stimulating political discussions, and encouraging information seeking, particularly among digitally connected audiences (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019; Theocharis et al., 2023).

Greater political awareness is subsequently associated with higher levels of voter engagement, including political participation, electoral involvement, civic engagement, and both online and offline political activities (Alodat et al., 2023; Ohme, 2019). In turn, increased voter engagement contributes to broader democratic outcomes, such as informed voting, inclusive political participation, and strengthened democratic processes (Boulianne, 2020; Lindner & Aichholzer, 2020).

The framework further proposes that these relationships are moderated by age, political literacy, algorithmic personalization, and misinformation. Previous studies indicate that younger citizens interact with political content differently from older voters because of varying patterns of social media use (Marquart et al., 2020). Likewise, higher levels of political literacy enable individuals to critically evaluate digital political information, whereas algorithmic personalization and misinformation may either reinforce political engagement or contribute to selective exposure, ideological polarization, and voter manipulation (Burkell & Regan, 2019; Neyazi, 2020; Echeverria, 2023). Accordingly, the framework provides an integrated perspective for understanding how politainment influences voter engagement while recognizing the contextual factors that shape its effects on democratic participation.

DISCUSSION

The present review demonstrates that digital politics has fundamentally transformed the way political information is communicated, consumed, and acted upon. The findings indicate that social media platforms have become central to contemporary political communication by facilitating direct interaction between political actors and citizens, increasing the accessibility of political information, and encouraging civic participation. These findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that digital platforms have expanded opportunities for democratic participation by reducing communication barriers and enabling greater citizen involvement in political

processes (Lindner & Aichholzer, 2020; Theocharis et al., 2023; Boulianne, 2020). However, the review also reveals that the democratic benefits of digital politics are accompanied by significant challenges, including misinformation, polarization, and algorithmic manipulation, indicating that technological advancement alone does not guarantee improved democratic outcomes.

One of the most significant findings of this review is the growing role of politainment as a dominant strategy of political communication in the digital era. The literature consistently suggests that integrating entertainment with political content increases audience attention, particularly among younger and politically disengaged citizens (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Gómez-García et al., 2023). Entertainment-oriented formats such as memes, influencer content, livestreams, and short-form videos simplify political messages and increase their dissemination across digital platforms. Nevertheless, scholars disagree regarding the long-term consequences of this transformation. While some studies argue that politainment serves as an effective gateway to political awareness and participation, others contend that excessive reliance on entertainment risks trivializing complex political issues and weakening informed democratic deliberation (Radošinská et al., 2021). These contrasting perspectives suggest that the effectiveness of politainment depends on the balance between entertainment value and the substantive quality of political information.

The review further indicates that political awareness functions as an important intermediary between exposure to politainment and voter engagement. Increased exposure to political information through social media encourages political discussion, information seeking, and civic awareness, which subsequently promote electoral participation and broader civic engagement (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019; Ohme, 2019). However, this relationship is not uniform across all populations. Differences in age, political literacy, patterns of media consumption, and digital competencies significantly influence how individuals interpret and respond to political content. Younger citizens, as digital natives, generally demonstrate higher engagement with digital political communication, although they are also more susceptible to selective exposure and algorithmically curated information environments (Marquart et al., 2020).

Another important finding concerns the dual role of algorithmic personalization. Personalized political communication enables political actors to deliver highly relevant messages to specific voter groups, potentially increasing communication efficiency and political engagement (Paatelainen et al., 2024). Conversely, personalized algorithms may reinforce ideological echo chambers, amplify misinformation, and reduce exposure to diverse political perspectives, thereby limiting informed decision-making (Burkell & Regan, 2019; Neyazi, 2020). These findings demonstrate that algorithmic personalization represents both an opportunity and a challenge for democratic communication, requiring greater transparency and accountability from digital platforms.

The synthesis also highlights the growing importance of media literacy in contemporary democratic societies. Across the reviewed studies, political literacy consistently emerged as a protective factor that enables citizens to critically evaluate digital political content, recognize misinformation, and participate more effectively in democratic processes (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). This finding suggests that improving digital and media literacy may be more sustainable than relying solely on regulatory interventions to address misinformation and political manipulation.

The proposed conceptual framework integrates these findings by illustrating how social media platforms influence voter engagement through politainment and political awareness while recognizing the moderating effects of age, political literacy, algorithmic personalization, and misinformation. Unlike previous studies that have examined these variables independently, this review provides a comprehensive synthesis that explains the interconnected pathways through which digital political communication shapes democratic participation.

Despite these contributions, the review has certain limitations. As a narrative literature review, it does not statistically evaluate the magnitude of relationships among the identified variables. Furthermore, most of the reviewed studies originate from specific political and cultural contexts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different democratic systems. Future research should employ systematic review methodologies, meta-analyses, longitudinal designs, and cross-national comparative studies to validate the proposed conceptual relationships and examine how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and generative media, further reshape political communication and voter behaviour.

The findings suggest that politainment is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently detrimental to democracy. Rather, its influence depends on how digital platforms, political actors, and citizens interact within increasingly complex information ecosystems. Strengthening media literacy, promoting responsible platform governance, and encouraging evidence-based political communication will be essential for ensuring that digital politics contributes to informed voter engagement and sustainable democratic development.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This review contributes to the literature on digital political communication by integrating fragmented evidence on digital politics, politainment, political awareness, voter engagement, and democratic outcomes into a unified conceptual framework. Previous studies have predominantly examined these constructs independently, focusing on social media use, political participation, or political communication in isolation. By synthesizing these interconnected dimensions, the present review demonstrates that politainment is not merely an entertainment phenomenon but a significant mechanism through which digital political communication influences political awareness and voter engagement. This integrated perspective extends existing theories of political communication

by emphasizing the sequential relationship between digital media exposure, entertainment-oriented political communication, political awareness, and democratic participation.

Furthermore, the proposed framework identifies age, political literacy, algorithmic personalization, and misinformation as important moderating variables that explain variations in voter engagement across different demographic and political contexts. Recognizing these moderating influences provides a more comprehensive understanding of why digital political communication produces different outcomes among different groups of citizens.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings have important implications for policymakers, political parties, social media companies, educators, and civil society organizations.

For political parties and campaign strategists, the findings suggest that entertainment-oriented political communication can increase voter outreach and engagement when combined with accurate, transparent, and evidence-based political information. Rather than relying solely on emotional or sensational content, political communication should promote informed public dialogue while maintaining audience engagement.

For social media platforms, the review highlights the importance of improving algorithmic transparency, strengthening fact-checking mechanisms, and reducing the spread of misinformation. Platform governance should balance freedom of expression with the responsibility to maintain the integrity of political information during electoral processes.

For governments and election management bodies, the findings support the development of regulatory frameworks that protect voter privacy, improve transparency in digital political advertising, and discourage manipulative political communication practices without restricting democratic participation.

Educational institutions should prioritize digital media literacy as an essential component of civic education. Equipping citizens with critical thinking and information evaluation skills can reduce vulnerability to misinformation while encouraging informed political participation.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the review adopts a narrative literature review approach, which relies on qualitative synthesis rather than quantitative statistical analysis. Consequently, it does not estimate the magnitude of relationships among the identified variables.

Second, the reviewed literature encompasses studies conducted across diverse political, cultural, and institutional contexts. Differences in electoral systems, media environments, and democratic traditions may influence the applicability of findings across countries.

Third, the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies means that political communication practices continue to change with the emergence of new platforms, artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, and generative media. Therefore, some findings may evolve as digital communication technologies continue to develop.

Finally, because this review synthesizes previously published studies, its conclusions depend on the methodological quality and scope of the available literature.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should move beyond descriptive analyses by empirically testing the conceptual framework proposed in this review. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and longitudinal research designs could be employed to examine the causal relationships among social media use, politainment, political awareness, voter engagement, and democratic outcomes.

Cross-national comparative studies are also needed to investigate whether the influence of politainment differs across political systems, cultures, and electoral environments. Such studies would improve the generalizability of existing findings and identify context-specific determinants of digital political engagement.

Emerging technologies present another promising avenue for future investigation. Researchers should explore how artificial intelligence, generative AI, virtual influencers, deepfakes, and immersive digital environments influence political communication, voter trust, and democratic participation.

Finally, future studies should examine intervention strategies aimed at strengthening political literacy and media literacy. Evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs, platform governance policies, and fact-checking initiatives would provide valuable evidence for improving democratic resilience within increasingly digital political environments.

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