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## An Exploration of Instagram as an Active Learning Tool for Gaining New Political Knowledge

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AN EXPLORATION OF INSTAGRAM AS AN ACTIVE LEARNING TOOL FOR  
GAINING NEW POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

BY

SARAH OLEARNICK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the way that Instagram can be an active learning platform for the political landscape. By surveying URI students this study looks at the various ways that students use Instagram for politics, their attitudes towards the platform as a political source, and their general interest in politics. The survey showed that those who have a higher interest in politics use various sources. The survey also showed that those who have a positive perception of Instagram as a political source do not use various other sources. This study serves as an extremely valuable launching point for additional research on the effects of Instagram as a platform and source for politics.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| ABSTRACT.....   | ii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....                                     | iii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS.....                                    | iv  |
| LIST OF TABLES.....                                       |     |
| CHAPTER   |     |
| 1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....                                 | 1   |
| Introduction.....   | 1   |
| Literature Review .....                                   | 3   |
| Instagram’s Rise: History & the Political Landscape.....  | 3   |
| Instagram’s Learning Ability in an Academic Setting ..... | 5   |
| Theory of Social Media and Politics.....                  | 7   |
| Politics on Instagram.....                                | 9   |
| Limits of the Literature.....                             | 11  |
| 2. A STUDY OF URI STUDENT’S INSTAGRAM USE FOR POLITICAL   |     |
| KNOWLEDGE.....  | 12  |
| Research Question.....                                    | 12  |
| Methodology.....  | 12  |
| Variables.....  | 13  |
| Demographic Information .....                             | 13  |
| Interest in Politics.....                                 | 13  |
| Source Diversity.....                                     | 13  |
| Political Issue Diversity.....                            | 13  |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Media Literacy.....                      | 14 |
| Instagram Attitude & Behavior Score..... | 14 |
| Approach to Data Analysis.....           | 15 |
| 3. RESULTS.....                          | 16 |
| 4. DISCUSSION.....                       | 22 |
| Limitations.....                         | 25 |
| Further Research.....                    | 25 |
| APPENDIX.....                            | 27 |
| A. Survey Questions.....                 | 27 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                        | 32 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.....  | 17 |
| Table 2. Correlational Analysis.....  | 18 |
| Table 3. Factor Analysis.....   | 18 |
| Table 4. Descriptive Statistics with Revised Instagram Score.....   | 19 |
| Table 5. Regression Analysis Predicting Level of Interest in Politics.....                                | 20 |
| Table 6. Regression Analysis Predicting Perception of Instagram as a Political<br>Information Source..... | 21 |



# CHAPTER 1

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Is Instagram a platform where users can actively learn about the political landscape? If so, what qualities help determine the use of Instagram as a source to gain new political knowledge? This paper seeks to evaluate the qualities that allow Instagram to be an educational resource in academia and see how those qualities or others apply to the political landscape of Instagram. The overarching goal of this study is to understand the ways that Instagram can be used as a political resource and what is needed to make the platform as effectively as possible for campaigns and users.

The political landscape has moved heavily to social media platforms, especially with the 2016 Presidential election where Donald J Trump became President. America watched as Trump used Twitter as a primary platform to relay information to the public. During President Trump's four years in office, he tweeted more than 26,000 times (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021). These tweets served as a real-time account of what the President was thinking. Ultimately President Trump did get banned on Twitter for the nature of his content, but it did not affect the impact this time in history had on the public (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021). President Trump's term served as a realization for society that the political landscape had moved heavily to social media.

This move also included the Black Lives Matter protest that hit Instagram in wake of George Floyd's murder. This took place with #BlackOutTuesday or #BlackLivesMatter. These hashtags served as a resource to the black community as well as allies to the community for a place to learn about the movement as well as know what

resources the movement needed (Wellman, 2020). The idea of the Black Lives Matter movement using the platform to engage and teach users about resources and the way of life of the Black community is what helped spark my curiosity about whether or not Instagram can be a platform that helps users learn.

An important factor to touch on about social media is that they are open platforms where users are free to add content that is relevant to their lives. Instagram has primarily been used to share photos and stay up to date with friends but in 2016 Gauthier, et al., explored whether the platform could be used to supplement their lecture material. The study found that 41% of students had an enhanced learning experience when professors use Instagram as a supplemental way to deliver class content (Gauthier, et al., 2016). In this study, students were not required to view any of the Instagram material rather at the beginning of the semester they were simply informed that it was available for them to use. This study's environment mimics the regular use of Instagram; users are not forced to look at the platform or to use it rather they decided to. This also mimics the political environment where citizens decide to consume political information to be informed and engaged citizens. With this overlapping type of environment, I believe it's important to examine whether or not the two have a relationship and whether or not the idea of engaging in "supplemental material" in the political landscape via Instagram can be as beneficial as it is to the academic setting.

This study uses URI students as a sample to explore whether or not the consumption of political information via Instagram can help create more informed citizens. This study is so important, especially in a society where young adults are so reliant on social media because it helps researchers learn some of the influences that

Instagram has and the variables that affect Instagram use. By determining whether or not Instagram can be used as a platform for young adults to learn about the political landscape this can be applied to determine if these factors can be applied to other demographics. This information could also help political campaigns be able to target younger voters if they know what allows them to learn. There are a lot of possibilities for the benefits of this study but most importantly it's vital to determine if this connection does exist and what variables influence the relationship.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Instagram's Rise: History & the Political Landscape*

When Instagram launched in October 2010 it was a photo-sharing platform that had the goal to be a platform similar to Twitter. Instead, 10 years later it has become a vital part of social justice movements and everyday life for young adults. The initial purpose of the app was to be a simple photo-sharing platform, there were hopes that the platform would have similarities to Twitter and become popular in the same way (Handayani, 2015). This goal quickly changed as the platform gained popularity and went through different ownership. In 2012 Facebook took over ownership of the app and started making a multitude of changes (Blystone, 2020). The most important update for this research is the ability to browse through both hashtags and locations (Blystone, 2020). This update allowed the platform to transform from a photo-sharing platform to a user-friendly platform for social justice movements.

One of the most popular social justice movements to use Instagram was the Black Lives Matter Movement. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement took over the app following George Floyd's murder creating a space for mobilization as well as a space to

learn about various resources, supplies that people needed, and any incidents of police violence that were taking place. Many protestors moved to the platform for an outlet to be seen and heard. Gary Chambers Jr, an active member of the movement, explained that “the revolution may not be televised, but they ain’t said nothing about social media ” (Ho & McCausland, 2020, p. 4). The news cycle shared stories and updates about situations like George Floyd's death but Instagram allowed the movement to continue to be at people’s fingertips. Etienne Maurice, a Los Angeles filmmaker, and Black Lives Matter Movement member said that he wants to make sure people can hear and see how Black people feel (Ho & McCausland, 2020). He continued explaining that Instagram allows him to do that by sharing videos and photos showing the experiences and trauma of Black people (Ho & McCausland).

Another important part of the movement was the use of #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackOutTuesday. In Wellman’s (2020) study he explained that the purpose of hashtags was to provide people with important information. Instagram would not have been a beneficial or productive resource unless it went through the upgrades that allowed users to search via hashtag. This upgrade allowed the Black Lives Matter movement to be as successful as it was. Though the carryout of #BlackOutTuesday is criticized the intent remains the same; to create a central hub for information to learn about the movement or resources to help the community.

The ability to create a community is an important aspect of Instagram. This creation of community is another reason why the Black Lives Matter movement was able to create such traction on the platform. Meina Abdulla, a co-founder of Black Lives Los Angeles explains how she believes people can use Instagram to become educated on the

topic. (Steward & Ghaffary, 2020). She explains that a lot of people aren't willing to read books but are willing to look at Instagram and view posts that explain complicated topics such as intersectionality, white privilege, or the surveillance state (Steward & Ghaffary, 2020). The community that was created with the Black Lives Matter movement helped people be able to learn about these complex topics.

Another form of community that is present on Instagram is through politicians. When following politicians' users can be notified when they go live and those sessions can be posted to their page or others (Steward & Ghaffary, 2020). These "lives" are essentially mini press conferences where users can ask questions and have them answered directly by the politician. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is known for holding these lives where she answers viewers' questions or speaks about important topics that are being discussed in Congress as well (Steward & Ghaffary, 2020). The opportunities create a space where people can learn as well as create a space where people feel like they can be heard. The creation of these types of communities has helped transform the social networking site to become more than just a social media platform but a space to learn.

#### *Instagram's Learning Ability in an Academic Setting*

Instagram's learning opportunities apply not only to social justice issues but also to academic settings. Hadayani's (2015) study, took place in a high school setting to explore various ways that Instagram could be implemented in the classroom. Instagram carryout was not part of this study, rather Hadayani did a content analysis to determine the most important features and ways Instagram could be used in the classroom. The first benefit identified was that Instagram would help connect teachers and students

(Handayani, 2015). Teachers would be able to make a “work account” giving their “teacher presence” that students could follow and interact with. This connection would allow for a better sense of community within the school and improve both the students’ school experience as well as their educational experience. Another use would be to teach students how to create and share digital media. This would be done through assignments such as following a school field trip needing to share a picture and creating a caption explaining the context of the photo or field trip (Handayani, 2015). These assignments would not only help with understanding how to create and share digital media to promote media literacy but also promote communication and proper grammar online (Handayani, 2015). These skills are vital to the society that high schoolers grow up in currently due to the impact and importance social media has on their lives. The overall takeaway of Handayani’s study was that Instagram would create the opportunity to make the educational process unique, interesting, and insightful. This engagement would allow students to explore different communication methods as well as create a better sense of community within the school and between students and teachers.

In another examination of applying Instagram to the educational field, Sar and Wahyudin (2019) analyzed this topic at the undergraduate level. In this study, engineering students who took English for Business were divided into three groups. These groups went through a questionnaire, interview, and observation period of the study. The questionnaire was meant to assess students’ perceptions of blended learning through Instagram. The interview process focused on their perceptions of blended learning as well as their experience applying it to their language learning experience. Both the questionnaire responses and interview responses were analyzed to determine

whether or not they had positive or negative attitudes. The results of both the questionnaire and the interview showed that students had a positive perception of blended learning. The results also showed that students experienced an improvement in learning English following the exercise. An important aspect to identify in this study is that students revealed that they “achieve some educational benefits from the technology as learning becomes more relaxed, spontaneous, and comfortable” (Sar & Wahyudin, 2019, p. 70). Another important takeaway is that students suggested that they become more confident in participating in blended learning. Sar & Wahyudin (2019) stated that “Instagram has succeeded in promoting students’ interest to learn language by participating and communicating in the task given.” (p. 71). Some of the assignments that were conducted for blended learning included posting videos and pictures showing the completion of a particular task and having to actively engage with other students. These activities as well as the questionnaire and interview support the concept of blended learning and using Instagram as a way to connect students and improve learning.

### *Theory of social media & Politics*

Politics and social media have been connected heavily since the rise and popularity of social networking sites. The term media theory refers to the utilization of media and the ways that new media affects representation or concepts such as social order (Couldry, 2012). This impact can be seen in various ways in the political landscape such as Obama’s election hinging on his social media use, Trump’s entire presidency using social media, or newer elected officials such as AOC using social media to campaign and connect with constituents. The most popular and researched connection between politics and social media is the use of social media for campaigning. Bosetta

(2018) compiled an analysis of the various ways all social media platforms are used for campaigning. For this study, he focuses on four different aspects to analyze: network structure, functionality, algorithmic filtering, and datafication. Network structure refers to the features that the particular platform has to allow networking between accounts or followers. This would refer to things such as the use of hashtags, the ability to search, privacy, or connectivity. Functionality refers to how content is delivered on the platform and how many people it can reach. Algorithmic filtering refers to the content visible to users. This essentially looks at how many people are viewing the content and how it lands on a particular person's feed. Lastly, datafication is a term created by Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier in 2013 which refers to “the quantification of users’ activities on a social media platform” (Bossetta, 2018). Essentially datafication takes a user's algorithmic filtering but translates it into data so datafication looks at things such as clicks on a post, sending a post, clicking on a hyperlink, or other data-driven activities. This study's analysis found that the 2016 election campaigns shared the same content across all platforms. It also found that during the 2016 election Facebook was the platform of choice for most campaigns, but all politicians still had a platform on newer platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, it just wasn't as built up. The biggest takeaway from this study though is the fact that all politicians had a social media platform in the 2016 election. This shows the importance that social media is playing on the political landscape and why research needs to continue to be done to evaluate the ins and outs of the political relationship with all platforms.

The reliance on using social media for political information has been seen primarily in young adults. Anderson (2020) explored the ways that students use social



media to learn about politics as well as how they use the platforms to engage in public discourse. Through a survey, Anderson (2020) found that despite students' constant use of social media they do not actively engage in sharing their political opinions. Anderson (2020) did find that approximately a quarter of students in this survey will passively gain political information on social media. This means that if something shows up on their feed they most likely will watch or read it, but they do not seek out the information. This idea of passive learning is fundamental to the carry-out of this study because it confirms that users can learn via social media even if it is passively.

### *Politics on Instagram*

It is accepted among scholars that as individuals started to rely on social media there was a reliance on social media for political information as well. Trevisan, et al (2019) study explores the ways that individuals engage with politicians via Instagram. In a content analysis of politicians as well as top public figures in Italy Trevisan looked at the similarities and differences that the various categories have when it comes to engagement with their followers for a two month's time span. Trevisan (2019) looked specifically at the volume of comments, comments length and timing, and mentions in comments. Trevisan (2019) found that political accounts receive a lot more comments compared to any other category. Music and sports only had a few posts that sparked roughly 5 comments for every 1,000 followers but politics had a completely different engagement. 8% of all political posts collected more than 4 comments per 1,000 followers (Trevisan, et al., 2019). This shows the increased engagement on Instagram when it comes to politics especially compared to other popular Instagram entities. Trevisan also found that "75% of comments to political posts are made within 8 hours

after being posted, while, for music, this happens within 4 hours” (pg 4). This suggests that those who engage via comments are engaging in a longer discussion or debate compared to other conversations that might fade away relatively quickly. The last major finding of Trevisan’s (2019) study is that political comments don’t tend to tag other users in the discussion instead they simply reply to the comment prior. This may show that users read the comment prior to sharing their opinion. Trevisan’s study helps understand how users engage with the political landscape via Instagram compared to other popular categories of social media accounts.

In Parmelee & Roman’s (2019) study they explore the motivations people have for following politicians on Instagram. This is done through a study that was shared via Instagram on various political pages. The study included questions about how many politicians they follow as well as questions adapted from prior uses and gratification theory research that used a 5-point scale to respond to statements that addressed various reasons or motivations an individual would have to follow politicians (Parmelee & Roman, 2019). This study in particular had a very high level of political participation with 82% having voted in the 2016 US general election. This study also provided insight into the types of politician’s users follow. 80% responded that they follow current US elected officials while a little over 40% said they follow former elected officials (Parmelee & Roman, 2019). The most important aspect of this study is the exploration of the motives for why individuals follow politicians. The first and most important factor was information and guidance. This means that people responded, ‘strongly agree’ to questions such as “to help me decide about important issues, to help me decide how to vote, or to keep up with issues of the day.’ The next factor was social utility which refers

to assisting in social interaction both online and offline. The last three factors were entertainment, convenience, and self-expression. The biggest takeaway from this study would be that people are motivated to follow politicians for information and guidance. This is an extremely important finding for the justification for this study because it shows that people are seeking to actively learn via Instagram.

### **Limits of the Literature**

Though all of these studies provide very important contributions to the literature surrounding Instagram and its ability to be a tool to learn there are obvious gaps. The most obvious one would be spawning from Anderson's (2020) study where he was able to find that users passively gain political information on social media. While this is a vital contribution it sparks a lot of follow-up questions, such as can, users, actively learn on social media? Meina Abdulla in Steward & Ghaffary's (2020) research touches on this idea when speaking about how the Black Lives Matter Movement can help people learn about topics such as intersectionality and white privilege by consuming information via Instagram. This study intends to expand on Anderson's (2020) study as well as Steward & Ghaffary's (2020) findings by surveying URI students to gauge their Instagram use and whether or not the platform helps them learn about the political landscape.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**A STUDY OF URI STUDENTS' INSTAGRAM USE**  
**FOR POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE**

**Research Question**

What factors influence young adults' ability to use Instagram as a source to learn about the political landscape?

**Methodology**

To explore Instagram's potential value as a learning platform specifically in the realm of politics, I developed a survey that was sent to the students at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in the Fall of 2022. The survey was sent via Qualtrics to all URI undergraduate, graduate, accelerated online, and non-matriculated students. The total population for this study was 16,558. After sending the survey via Qualtrics students were explained the purpose of the survey, IRB's approval, and the opportunity to make an informed decision before answering questions. Once students read through the consent form and agreed to continue they were brought to the actual survey. Following the initial email with the survey students were sent a follow-up email 1 week later to remind them if they had not completed the survey. The survey was live for approximately 2 weeks. The study addressed the perception students have of using Instagram as a political source, the types of sources they use, the political issues they were interested in, as well as media literacy and political interest. Appendix A displays the survey in its entirety. Following the 2 weeks, the sample size was 649 students. This was roughly 4% of URI students.

## Variables

### *Demographic Information*

To gauge the type of URI students answering the survey three demographic questions were asked. First, respondents were asked what year in school they had the options: 'First Year, Second Year, Third Year, Fourth Year, Fifth Year, Graduate Studies, or Other.' Second, respondents were asked what gender they identify with, and the response options were 'Female, Male, Non-Binary, Other, and Prefer Not to Say.' Lastly, respondents were asked what their major is, which was a fill-in response given the volume of different majors at URI.

### *Interest in Politics*

To measure interest in politics the survey question asked: "How interested in politics are you?" Respondents answered this question on a 0-10 sliding scale.

### *Source Diversity*

To measure source diversity respondents were asked in the survey: Where do you receive your political information? Respondents were able to check as many as applied out of the following 8 sources: social networking sites, mainstream media, online newspapers, radio, podcasts, friends & family, print newspapers, and print magazines. This variable was transformed into a single score that represents the diversity of sources used by subjects.

### *Political Issue Diversity*

Political issue diversity was measured by asking respondents: What type of political issues do you follow on Instagram? Respondents were able to check as many that applied out of the following 14 options: general politics, business regulation, crime

and law enforcement, economic policy, education, environment and climate change, foreign policy, health, and health care, human rights, women's rights, immigration, LGBTQ+, national security, and science. This variable was transformed into a single score that represents the diversity of political issues that interest participants.

### *Media Literacy*

Media literacy was measured by two questions: 'How often have you learned about how to learn, create and share digital media in school?' and 'How often have you discussed how to effectively share your political opinion on social media in school?' Both of these questions were answered on a four-point scale (1-Never, 2-Rarely, 3-Often, 4-Always). In SPSS this variable combined both questions giving respondents a media score ranging from 2-8. The variable media literacy as well as the questions were adapted from the Kahne & Bowyer study in 2019.

### *Instagram Attitude & Behavior Score*

Attitude and behavior of Instagram-related behaviors and attitudes were measured by five survey questions. Attitudes were measured with three items: 'How much do you agree with the following statement: Instagram helps me stay up to date on politics, I use Instagram to learn about new candidates in the political landscape. Instagram-related attitudes were measured by two statements: "Seeing political information on Instagram makes me want to learn more," and "Without Instagram, I would not be up to date on what is happening in the political landscape." These questions were all asked on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) - 5 (Strongly Agree).

This variable was transformed into a single score that represents how subjects perceive the value of Instagram as a source of political information. This variable is portrayed as 'IG Score.'

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

Once receiving the survey results the data was exported to SPSS. When in SPSS the data was cleaned to eliminate unneeded information such as start date, end date, location, etc. The data was also cleaned to eliminate any responses that took less than a minute to complete. This eliminated 193 cases. If a respondent didn't spend more than a minute on the survey, the quality of the data could be unreliable as participants most likely did not put a lot of time or thought into their responses. Once the data was cleaned and transformed to represent the variables of interest, I examined the data through descriptive statistics. Then I looked at the relationship between variables by using correlational analysis. The following statistical analysis tests were run: factor analysis and regression analysis. Two regression analysis tests were performed using the level of political interest and the value of Instagram as a political source as the dependent variables.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

The variables examined in this survey: Interest in Politics, Source Diversity, Issue Diversity, Media Literacy, and Perception of Instagram, all help address the ways that Instagram can be perceived or not perceived as a source for gaining political knowledge. The results explained in this chapter show three major findings. The first is that those interested in politics use multiple sources to receive their political information. Second, those who have a positive perception of using Instagram as a source are also interested in a variety of topics. Third, those who have a positive perception of Instagram as a source do not use multiple sources for their information. The evidence and tables supporting these findings are explained below.

Students in this survey varied considerably in their level of interest in politics. As Table 1 shows, the level of Interest in Politics ranges from 0 to 10, with a mean score of 5.2 and a standard deviation of 2.55. Participants also indicated that they use various sources for their political information. The amount of source diversity had a range of 1 to 8, with a mean score of 3.3 which indicated that participants primarily use 3 different sources and a standard deviation of 1.3. Political Issue Diversity refers to the number of political issues participants were interested in. This ranged from 1 to 14 with a mean of 5.9 and a standard deviation of 3.2. Media Literacy scores ranged from 1 to 8 with a mean of 3.4 and a standard deviation of 1.3. IG Political Behavior referred to the ways that participants used Instagram. Political behavior had a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 11 with a mean of 7.7 and a standard deviation of 0.79. IG Political Attitudes referred



to the way participants perceived Instagram as a source, this had a range of 1 to 20. The mean was 12 and the standard deviation was 4.1.

| Descriptive Statistics                               |     |         |         |         |                |
|--|-----|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
|  | N   | Minimum | Maximum | Mean    | Std. Deviation |
| How interested in politics are you? - Interest Level | 607 | .00     | 10.00   | 5.2455  | 2.55320        |
| Amount of Source Diversity                           | 618 | 1.00    | 8.00    | 3.2638  | 1.26543        |
| Political Issue Diveristy                            | 475 | 1.00    | 14.00   | 5.9642  | 3.23170        |
| Media Literacy Score                                 | 471 | 1.00    | 8.00    | 3.4204  | 1.31502        |
| IG Political Behavior                                | 504 | 6.00    | 11.00   | 7.7440  | .79008         |
| IG Political Attitudes                               | 506 | 1.00    | 20.00   | 12.0158 | 4.05796        |
| Valid N (listwise)                                   | 433 |         |         |         |                |

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

After examining this data, a correlational analysis was run, as shown in Table 2. Findings show a positive relationship between the level of interest in politics and the amount of source diversity ( $r(604) = .296, p < 0.001$ ). Findings also show a positive relationship between the level of interest in politics and the amount of political issue diversity ( $r(466) = .266, p < 0.001$ ). There is not a statistically significant relationship between the level of interest in politics and perception of Instagram (IG Political Attitudes), media literacy, and Instagram political behaviors. In terms of the amount of source diversity, there is a positive relationship with political issue diversity ( $r(473) = .311, p < 0.001$ ). There is no other statistically significant relationship to the other variables.

An exciting finding when running the correlational analysis was the negative relationship between IG political behavior and IG political attitudes ( $r(504) = -0.121, p = 0.006$ ). To explore this further, a factor analysis of the five Instagram survey items was performed, using principal components analysis. As Table 3 shows, all 5 variables are intercorrelated, loading on a single factor that explains 50.25% of the total variance.

Therefore, I combined all five items to make the variable ‘IG Score,’ as shown in Table 4, a revised descriptive analysis. The revised variable, IG score, ranges from 1 to 19, with a mean of 10.89 and a standard deviation of 4.09.

|  |                     | Correlations   |                            |                           |                      |                       |                        |
|--|---------------------|--|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
|  |                     | How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level | Amount of Source Diversity | Political Issue Diveristy | Media Literacy Score | IG Political Behavior | IG Political Attitudes |
| How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level | Pearson Correlation | 1  | .296**                     | .266**                    | .000                 | .002                  | .136**                 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     |  | <.001                      | <.001                     | .995                 | .971                  | .002                   |
|  | N                   | 607  | 604                        | 466                       | 461                  | 493                   | 495                    |
| Amount of Source Diversity                           | Pearson Correlation | .296**   | 1                          | .311**                    | .106*                | -.023                 | .101*                  |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <.001  |                            | <.001                     | .021                 | .612                  | .023                   |
|  | N                   | 604  | 618                        | 473                       | 468                  | 501                   | 503                    |
| Political Issue Diveristy                            | Pearson Correlation | .266**   | .311**                     | 1                         | .104*                | -.021                 | .386**                 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <.001  | <.001                      |                           | .029                 | .652                  | <.001                  |
|  | N                   | 466  | 473                        | 475                       | 442                  | 475                   | 475                    |
| Media Literacy Score                                 | Pearson Correlation | .000   | .106*                      | .104*                     | 1                    | -.036                 | .226**                 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .995   | .021                       | .029                      |                      | .436                  | <.001                  |
|  | N                   | 461  | 468                        | 442                       | 471                  | 469                   | 471                    |
| IG Political Behavior                                | Pearson Correlation | .002   | -.023                      | -.021                     | -.036                | 1                     | -.121**                |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .971   | .612                       | .652                      | .436                 |                       | .006                   |
|  | N                   | 493  | 501                        | 475                       | 469                  | 504                   | 504                    |
| IG Political Attitudes                               | Pearson Correlation | .136**   | .101*                      | .386**                    | .226**               | -.121**               | 1                      |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .002   | .023                       | <.001                     | <.001                | .006                  |                        |
|  | N                   | 495  | 503                        | 475                       | 471                  | 504                   | 506                    |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2: Correlational Analysis**

| Total Variance Explained |       |                     |              |                                     |               |              |
|--------------------------|-------|---------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Component                | Total | Initial Eigenvalues |              | Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings |               |              |
|                          |       | % of Variance       | Cumulative % | Total                               | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1                        | 2.513 | 50.251              | 50.251       | 2.513                               | 50.251        | 50.251       |
| 2                        | .958  | 19.150              | 69.401       |                                     |               |              |
| 3                        | .624  | 12.470              | 81.871       |                                     |               |              |
| 4                        | .531  | 10.612              | 92.483       |                                     |               |              |
| 5                        | .376  | 7.517               | 100.000      |                                     |               |              |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>**

|   | Component<br>1 |
|---|----------------|
| How much do you agree with the following statement:<br>Instagram helps me stay up to date on politics. – Slide to Agreement Level   | .835           |
| How many political accounts (politicians and/or political news outlets) do you follow on Instagram?   | .475           |
| How much do you agree with the following statement:<br>I use Instagram to learn about new candidates in the political landscape. – Slide to Agreement Level                     | .739           |
| How much do you agree with the following statement:<br>Seeing political information on Instagram makes me want to learn more. – Slide to Agreement Level                        | .765           |
| How much do you agree with the following statement:<br>Without Instagram, I would not be up to date on what is happening in the political landscape. – Slide to Agreement Level | .676           |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

**Table 3: Factor Analysis**

**Descriptive Statistics**

|  | N   | Minimum | Maximum | Mean    | Std. Deviation |
|--|-----|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
| How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level | 607 | .00     | 10.00   | 5.2455  | 2.55320        |
| Amount of Source Diversity                           | 618 | 1.00    | 8.00    | 3.2638  | 1.26543        |
| Political Issue Diveristy                            | 475 | 1.00    | 14.00   | 5.9642  | 3.23170        |
| Media Literacy Score                                 | 471 | 1.00    | 8.00    | 3.4204  | 1.31502        |
| IGScore  | 496 | 1.00    | 19.00   | 10.8972 | 4.09527        |
| Valid N (listwise)                                   | 431 |         |         |         |                |

**Table 4, Descriptive Statistics with Revised Instagram Score**

To explore how the various factors were associated with interest in politics and belief in Instagram as a valuable political source two regression tests were performed. The first regression test uses interest in politics as the dependent variable. As Table 2 shows, media literacy and perception of Instagram were not associated with level of interest in politics. The evidence clearly showed that the use of multiple sources predicted

interest in politics,  $b = .22$ ,  $t(426) = 4.709$ ,  $p < .001$ . The diversity of political issues also predicted the level of interest in politics,  $b = .156$ ,  $t(426) = 3.01$ ,  $p < .003$ . These two variables explained a significant proportion of variance in the level of interest in politics score,  $R^2 = .108$ ,  $F(4, 426) = 12.83$ ,  $p < .001$ .

| Model Summary |                   |          |                   |                            |  |  |
|---------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| Model         | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |  |  |
| 1             | .328 <sup>a</sup> | .108     | .099              | 2.37648                    |  |  |

a. Predictors: (Constant), IGScore, Amount of Source Diversity, Media Literacy Score, Political Issue Diveristy

  

| ANOVA <sup>a</sup> |            |                |     |             |        |                    |
|--------------------|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------------|
| Model              |            | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F      | Sig.               |
| 1                  | Regression | 289.843        | 4   | 72.461      | 12.830 | <.001 <sup>b</sup> |
|                    | Residual   | 2405.892       | 426 | 5.648       |        |                    |
|                    | Total      | 2695.735       | 430 |             |        |                    |

a. Dependent Variable: How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level  
b. Predictors: (Constant), IGScore, Amount of Source Diversity, Media Literacy Score, Political Issue Diveristy

  

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup> |                            |                             |            |                           |        |       |                                 |             |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Model                     |                            | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t      | Sig.  | 95.0% Confidence Interval for B |             |
|                           |                            | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |        |       | Lower Bound                     | Upper Bound |
| 1                         | (Constant)                 | 3.127                       | .512       |                           | 6.111  | <.001 | 2.121                           | 4.133       |
|                           | Amount of Source Diversity | .448                        | .095       | .227                      | 4.709  | <.001 | .261                            | .634        |
|                           | Political Issue Diveristy  | .121                        | .040       | .156                      | 3.011  | .003  | .042                            | .199        |
|                           | Media Literacy Score       | -.115                       | .088       | -.062                     | -1.317 | .189  | -.288                           | .057        |
|                           | IGScore                    | .045                        | .033       | .071                      | 1.395  | .164  | -.019                           | .109        |

a. Dependent Variable: How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level

**Table 5: Regression Analysis Predicting Level of Interest in Politics**

The second regression test used ‘IG Score’ as the dependent variable. One main finding of this regression test was that the diversity of political issues predicted the perception of Instagram as an information source,  $b = .156$ ,  $t(426) = 8.19$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that those who were interested in multiple issues also had a more positive perception of using Instagram as a source. As Table 6 shows, source diversity also has a strong negative relationship with perceptions of the value of Instagram as a political information source  $b = -.128$ ,  $t(426) = -2.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that subjects with lower source diversity scores were more likely to perceive that Instagram was valuable.

Evidence also clearly showed that exposure to media literacy in school predicted belief in the value of Instagram as a political information source,  $b = .173$ ,  $t(426) = 3.91$ ,

$p < .001$ . These three variables explained a significant proportion of variance in the level of interest in politics score,  $R^2 = .184$ ,  $F(4, 426) = 24.009$ ,  $p < .001$ .

| Model Summary |                   |          |                   |                            |
|---------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Model         | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
| 1             | .429 <sup>a</sup> | .184     | .176              | 3.53362                    |

a. Predictors: (Constant), How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level, Media Literacy Score, Political Issue Diveristy, Amount of Source Diversity

  

| ANOVA <sup>a</sup> |            |                |     |             |        |                    |
|--------------------|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------------|
| Model              |            | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F      | Sig.               |
| 1                  | Regression | 1199.175       | 4   | 299.794     | 24.009 | <.001 <sup>b</sup> |
|                    | Residual   | 5319.238       | 426 | 12.486      |        |                    |
|                    | Total      | 6518.413       | 430 |             |        |                    |

a. Dependent Variable: IGScore  
b. Predictors: (Constant), How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level, Media Literacy Score, Political Issue Diveristy, Amount of Source Diversity

  

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup> |  |                             |            |                           |        |       |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|
| Model                     |  | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t      | Sig.  |
|                           |  | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |        |       |
| 1                         | (Constant)   | 7.539                       | .705       |                           | 10.699 | <.001 |
|                           | Amount of Source Diversity                           | -.393                       | .144       | -.128                     | -2.735 | .007  |
|                           | Political Issue Diveristy                            | .458                        | .056       | .381                      | 8.195  | <.001 |
|                           | Media Literacy Score                                 | .502                        | .128       | .173                      | 3.915  | <.001 |
|                           | How interested in politics are you? – Interest Level | .100                        | .072       | .064                      | 1.395  | .164  |

a. Dependent Variable: IGScore

**Table 6, Regression Analysis Predicting Perception of Instagram as a Political Information Source**

For demographic characteristics of the survey, 26% were first-year students, 22% were second-year students, 17% were third-year students, 12% were fourth-year students, 3% were fifth-year students, 18% were graduate students, and 1% responded with other. In terms of gender identification, 19% were male, 66% female, 4% were non-binary, and less than 1% responded other and prefer not to say. Various majors participated in this survey, some of the most popular were psychology, education, pharmacy, marketing, computer science, business, biology, nursing, kinesiology, and undeclared/undecided.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper was to explore whether or not Instagram could be a source to learn about the political landscape. This was done by surveying URI students, the data was then analyzed and tested through regression analysis in SPSS. There were three major findings in this study.

First, source diversity is the most important variable that predicts a student's level of interest in politics. This means that those who have a high interest in politics also use multiple sources for their political information. Source diversity was measured by asking respondents to check all the outlets that applied to where they learned about politics. Evidence collected in this study shows that those who use multiple sources are also more interested in politics. This makes sense because if someone is actively engaged in the political landscape then they will want to ensure that the information they are consuming is correct, thus, using multiple sources. This is important to recognize because it shows that politically active citizens are not living in either sound-bite culture or echo chambers. Sound-bite culture refers to when there is a lack of critical analysis of the news story focusing only on the headline and quick information about the story (el-Nawawy, 2012). An echo chamber is defined as an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own " (GCF Global, n.d.). It's important to avoid both of these types of cultures because they promote less politically engaged citizens. The idea that those who are interested in politics also engage in more sources is extremely encouraging to someone who cares about the political landscape as

well because it means that people are taking the steps to be active members of the political landscape and use various sources to learn about topics of interest.

The second finding shows that those who have a more positive perception of Instagram as a political source are also interested in a wide variety of political issues. Political issue diversity was measured, in similarity to source diversity, where respondents were able to select as many political issues as possible that they were interested in. This is an interesting finding because it suggests that those who use Instagram as a political source use Instagram for multiple political issues rather than just following specific issues they follow multiple. This evidence helps with network structure and functionality for politicians who use Instagram to deliver content. Network structure refers to the features that the platform has to allow networking between accounts and followers, essentially the community aspect of Instagram (Bossetta, 2020). This finding in the lends of network structure is important to Facebook being the owner of Instagram because it informs them that the platform is being used to learn about a variety of topics. Knowing this information can be insightful for future development of the platform to ensure that users can still access the various issues that they are interested in. The term functionality refers to how content is delivered (Bossetta, 2020). This term is also important concerning this finding because it can help politicians and political campaigns develop the functionality or content that they are sharing on Instagram specifically. In the 2016 election Bossetta (2020) identified that Facebook was the most popular social media platform for campaigns because of its functionality, however, this study identifies that those who use Instagram as a source use it for various topics. Knowing this information allows campaigns to tailor their messages to Instagram

specifically. For example, politicians now know to showcase their stance on topics such as women's rights, healthcare, education, immigration, and foreign policy rather than just one of those topics because the viewers on Instagram will engage with that more than just a singular topic.

Lastly, this study showed that those who value Instagram as a political source tend to use a smaller variety of media sources. This was measured in Table 6 which conducted a regression analysis between Instagram perception and the other variables. Instagram perception was measured by combining all Instagram-related questions in the survey. Source diversity was measured by asking respondents to check the sources that they use to gain political knowledge.

This finding is particularly interesting and troubling because it does support sound-bite culture and echo chambers. The creation of echo chambers is particularly concerning because it implies that users are not receiving multiple perceptions of the problem which causes them to not be able to understand an entire issue and its potential complexity.

Again, an echo chamber is defined as "an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect or reinforce their own" (GCF Global, n.d.). Being in a society where people only reinforce their own opinion causes political tension to rise which ultimately leads to people being uninterested in the topic because they want to avoid that tension. While the first finding of this study, those who are interested in politics use multiple sources, is encouraging it is limited to only those who are interested in politics. This finding, those who have a positive perception of Instagram as a source use a smaller variety of sources, is troubling because it applies to the majority of those who have a positive perception of Instagram. This is also troubling due to the reliance



that young adults have on social media. It provides a lot of room for additional research to understand echo chambers and their potential connection to social media as a source.

### **Limitations**

While this survey does help create new knowledge in the field of Instagram's ability to be a source to learn about the political landscape it is essential to address the study's limitations. First, this study only used URI students as the population. As addressed in the research question, the study looked specifically at young adults, this limits the conclusions that can be made about the findings and the application of the findings. It's vital when looking at these findings to keep in mind that the population was URI students. To strengthen these findings the study could be expanded to all colleges in Rhode Island or focus on a town of Rhode Island rather than colleges. Both of these options would help strengthen the research in different ways. If expanded to all colleges the results would be more concrete. If expanded to a town in Rhode Island there would be more demographics included which could help apply the findings to different age groups or genders. This study could also be made stronger with an interview portion. An interview portion would allow respondents to expand on their responses. This would allow for a strong conclusion to be made about the relationship between variables. Lastly, a limitation but also an opportunity for future research would be to control for political knowledge in the study. This would help gauge how politically active and knowledgeable the respondent is. This would help strengthen a finding such as those who are politically active use multiple sources because we would be able to see if that matches up directly with respondents who are politically active given their political knowledge.

### **Further Research**

This study was created by expanding upon various findings that had been made previously in the field. I believe that this study can also serve as a launching point for additional research. Some additional questions adding to this research could be:

- Knowing Instagram's impact on the political landscape, is this relationship replicated on other forms of social media such as Facebook or Twitter?
- How does media literacy specifically impact the use of social media as a political source? An experiment could be conducted with a pre-test to gauge participants' current media literacy scores in relation to their Instagram use and then a post-test would gauge if this has changed after undergoing some form of media literacy teaching.
- Is Instagram serving as a political source a beneficial addition or does it cause an echo chamber that should be avoided?
- What impact does control for political knowledge have on this specific study? This would be done by adding questions to help determine political knowledge and then continuing the survey as is.
- Do those who have existing political knowledge showcase more active political behavior on Instagram or less?

The survey does involve questions that could have addressed Instagram behavior but due to the intercorrelation with Instagram attitudes, they needed to be disregarded. However, Instagram behavior is a point of interest for continued research. This study helps pilot a lot of future research that will help explore Instagram's role in political learning even further.

## APPENDIX

### Survey Questions

Q1: What year in school are you in?

- First Year
- Second Year
- Third Year
- Fourth Year
- Fifth Year
- Graduate Studies
- Other

Q2: What gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q3: What is your major?

Q4: How interested in politics are you?

- Sliding Scale, 0-Not Interest, 10-Extremely Interested

Q5: Where do you receive your political information? Check all that apply.

- Social Networking Sites (Examples: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook)
- Online Newspapers
- Mainstream Media Outlets (Example: FOX, CNN, NBC)

- Radio
- Podcasts
- Friends & Family
- Print Newspapers
- Print Magazines

Q6: Did you vote in the 2020 Presidential election?

- Yes
- No
- Not able to vote

Q7: What political party do you belong to?

- Democrat
- Independent
- Republican
- Other

Q8: Have you encountered political information on Instagram?

- Yes
- No

*If respondents answered 'No' to Q8 the survey ended.*

Q9: What type of political information do you follow on Instagram? Check all that apply.

- General Politics
- Business Regulation
- Crime and Law Enforcement
- Education
- Health and Healthcare
- Human Rights
- Women's Rights
- LGBTQ+

- Environment and Climate Change
- Foreign Policy
- National Security
- Science

Q10: How much do you agree with the following statement: Instagram helps me stay up to date on politics.

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Strongly Disagree 5-Strongly Agree

Q11: Do you follow politicians on Instagram?

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

Q12: Do you follow political news outlets on Instagram? (Example: Politico, New York Times, FOX)

- Yes
- No

Q13: How many political accounts (politicians and/or political news outlets do you follow on Instagram?

- None
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16+

Q14: If you do not follow any political accounts, does political information still appear on your feed?

- Yes

- No
- Not Applicable since I follow political accounts

Q15: How often have you learned about how to create and share digital media in school?

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Never 4-Always

Q16: How much do you agree with the following statement: I use Instagram to learn about new candidates in the political landscape.

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Strongly Disagree, 5-Strongly Agree

Q17: When you see an interesting story on Instagram, do you click to read the entire article?

- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever

Q18: How often have you discussed how to effectively share your political opinion on social media in school?

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Never 4-Always

Q19: Do you think Instagram is a valuable tool to learn about upcoming political elections?

- Yes
- No

Q20: How much do you agree with the following statement: Seeing political information on Instagram makes me want to learn more.

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Strongly Disagree 5-Strongly Agree

Q21: How much do you agree with the following statement: Without Instagram, I would not be up to date on what is happening in the political landscape.

- Slide to Agreement Level. 1-Strongly Disagree 5-Strongly Agree

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