Insta-Politicos: Motivations for Following Political Leaders on Instagram

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Abstract
This study expands uses and gratifications research into the area of political Instagram use. A survey shows the motives for following political leaders on the social media platform and how followers’ motives are associated with their demographics and political attitudes. Findings indicate that information/guidance motives are the most important for following political leaders on Instagram, with social utility being the next highest motive. Also, males use Instagram more for social utility purposes than females, and having an entertainment motive is related to being young. The results also provide insight into how the politically active can be more influential on Instagram.

Keywords
Instagram, politics, survey, uses and gratifications

Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing application, is quickly growing in political importance. At 400 million active users, Instagram is the second largest social media site, ahead of Twitter and behind Facebook (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). During the 2016 US presidential election, all major party candidates during the primaries and general election actively used Instagram to further their message (Duffy, 2016; Sander, 2015). Internationally, leaders in more than 70% of countries in the United Nations have an Instagram presence (Burson-Marsteller, 2017).

Instagram has many features that aid in political advocacy. Instagram messages, called posts, can include photos, short-form video, and text that provide political news. Distinctive filters can be used to change the color balance or contrast on photos to express different feelings. The posts can request Instagram users to take actions, such as voting for candidates. To interact with leaders, users can “tag” a political leader in a post, which can be seen by the leader and the users’ followers, or send a direct message, which is seen only by the leader. Users also can “like” a leader’s post, which increases the popularity of a leader’s message.

Visual communication research suggests that creative images have the potential to influence public opinion because images can have greater success at grabbing viewers’ attention, conveying emotions, and changing political behavior (Brader, 2005; Graber, 1996). Grabe and Bucy (2009) note that images are “central to the conduct and outcome of contemporary politics” (p. 7). With its heavy focus on visuals, Instagram may enjoy similar political influence.

Millions of people follow the Instagram accounts of current and former politicians, such as Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. What is not clear is what motivates people to follow political leaders on Instagram. Knowing the followers’ motives can provide insight into what type of influence Instagram has—or can have—politically.

It is also important to know if demographic factors and political attitudes influence political Instagram users’ motives. It may be that users’ motives vary by age, gender, ideology, interest in politics, and trust in government. Politicians could use this information to tailor their uses of Instagram based on the demographic makeup and political attitudes of the groups they wish to influence.

In this article, uses and gratifications theory provides a framework for understanding Instagram users’ motives for following political leaders and how the motives are influenced by demographic variables and political attitudes. The study is based on a survey of 309 people who follow at least one political leader on Instagram, and it reveals why the followers use Instagram for politics. In doing so, the data also provide insight into how the politically active can be more influential on Instagram.

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Uses and Gratification for Politics Online

Uses and gratifications theory often has been employed to understand how and why people use social media and the Internet generally (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Ruggiero, 2000). Uses and gratifications research on Instagram is beginning to emerge (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017; Sheldon, Rauschnabel, Car, & Antony, 2017), but not yet in a political communication context. This theory is concerned with seven aspects of media use, according to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973):

1. the social and the psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engaging in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (p. 510)

Uses and gratifications studies assume people are goal-oriented users of media who are aware of their motivations for media use and the needs they are trying to gratify (Ruggiero, 2000). A person’s motives can influence how they use media and how they are affected by it. For example, those with information-seeking and social motives are more likely to share news on social media (Lee & Ma, 2012). In addition, social, political, psychological, and demographic factors can influence which motives people have (Parmelee & Perkins, 2012) or affect media use directly (Haridakis & Rubin, 2003).

Past research has identified several motives for using various online platforms politically. Social utility and self-expression motivations are at the top of the list for users of chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, and social networking sites, while information-seeking is a more dominant motive with users of blogs (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Macafee, 2013; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Guidance has been found to be the main motive for visiting political websites (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). Social utility refers to choosing online sites that can be resources when users interact with friends or acquaintances, and self-expression deals with using online sites as a vehicle to express support or criticism of political leaders or ideas. Information-seeking refers to choosing sites that keep users up-to-date on various issues, while guidance suggests that the information found guides users’ political choices.

Convenience and entertainment motives are high on the list of reasons for nonpolitical uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Convenience refers to ease of use, and entertainment is associated with amusement and relaxation. This study is one of the first to examine the uses and gratifications of political Instagram use. If the motives for political Instagram use are similar to the reasons for using Facebook and Twitter politically, social utility and self-expression should dominate (Macafee, 2013; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). However, Instagram’s focus on visual imagery makes it similar to YouTube, and there is no consensus on how the video sharing website is used politically. Some have found that entertainment is the top motive for using YouTube for political information (Hanson, Haridakis, & Sharma, 2011), while other research shows informational and guidance reasons predominate (Kaye & Johnson, 2015). Another study found YouTube being used for informational reasons when viewing traditional news content and for interpersonal communication purposes when sharing news videos (Haridakis & Hanson, 2008). It may also be that there are unique motives for using Instagram politically that need to be discovered. Uses and gratifications studies on the nonpolitical uses of Instagram do not agree on the top motives. Self-promotion and social interaction motives are the most important, according to some researchers (Sheldon et al., 2017), but not others (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Demographic and Political Influences on Motives and Media Use

The motives people have to use media often do not happen in isolation, but are associated with demographic factors and political attitudes, which can trigger or inhibit communication motivations, affect media use, and influence the effects of media use. In terms of demographic factors, research on the political uses of social media and the Internet indicate that age, gender, education, and income are associated with motives and usage patterns. Younger age predicts social and entertainment motives to use Twitter for politics (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012, p. 67), while being young predicts using chat rooms and MySpace for political information-seeking motives (Ancu & Cozma, 2009, p. 576; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, p. 217). Women are more likely than men to use Twitter politically to fulfill informational and guidance motivations (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012, p. 67). Those with more education are less likely to have a guidance motive to engage in general Internet use for political information (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, p. 65). On Facebook, gender and race are related to posting political comments (Macafee, 2013, p. 2774).

Demographic variables can also influence which media platforms are used for political information. Blogs are used politically more by men, those with higher income, and those with higher education (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2006), while bulletin boards and electronic mailing lists are used politically more by the young and those with lower incomes (in relative rather than absolute terms; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, 2006).

Turning now to political attitudes, past studies have shown that interest in politics, self-efficacy, trust in government, and likelihood of voting often influence people’s motives to gather political information online and the type of
sites they choose to visit. Political interest predicts social and entertainment motives for political Twitter use (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Political self-efficacy, or a person’s confidence in their ability to understand and influence political issues, predicts both information-seeking and guidance motivations to use the Web for political information (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, p. 64). High trust in government predicts using the Web politically with an information-seeking motive, while choosing to vote predicts using the Web politically for convenience (Kaye & Johnson, 2004, p. 214-215). Low trust in government predicts having a self-expression motive to use blogs (Kaye, 2005, p. 89). A high interest in politics predicts having a social utility motive for using the Web for politics (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, p. 64) and using blogs for information-seeking purposes (Kaye, 2005, p. 84).

On Facebook, high political interest is related to posting political links, status updates, and likes, but self-efficacy has no influence over which features are used politically on the social media site (Macafee, 2013, p. 2773). Based on the social media research summarized here, young Instagram users are most likely to have entertainment motives for following political leaders’ posts, women are most likely to have information-seeking and guidance motives, and political interest should predict social and entertainment motives. This study investigates the degree to which such individual differences influence political Instagram use.

Political Leaders on Instagram

Because this study examines why people follow political leaders on Instagram, it is important to understand what types of individuals are considered as political leaders worth following. While some individuals, such as elected public officials, clearly fit the description, it may be that less obvious choices are as influential or more so. This is a time in which many politically influential people are no longer hold public office, such as the Clintons, or never have, such as cable news commentators and talk radio personalities. Revealing the types of individuals and groups that most followers consider political leaders can show where political power really resides among Instagram’s more than 400 million users. For example, on Twitter it was found that while 88% of politically active users follow elected officials, more than 70% also consider some individuals not in office to be political leaders worth following (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012, p. 47). It has long been known that political opinion leadership can come from many sources, including politicians, journalists, bloggers, friends, and acquaintances (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Based on an understanding of uses and gratifications theory, political information gathering on social media and the Internet generally, and the political potential of Instagram, there are four research questions to be answered regarding who is followed on Instagram politically and why followers do so. The research questions are designed to reveal who are considered political leaders on Instagram, what motivates Instagram users to follow political leaders, and to what degree followers’ motives correlate with demographic and political factors.

RQ1: To what degree do Instagram users in the sample follow political leaders who are currently elected officials, individuals who were previously elected officials, and individuals who have never been elected officials?

RQ2: What are the most important motives for following political leaders on Instagram?

RQ3: What is the relationship between following political leaders on Instagram and political variables (such as interest in politics, political efficacy, trust in government, past voting behavior, likelihood of voting, party affiliation, and political ideology) and demographic variables (such as gender, age, race, income, and education)?

RQ4: To what degree do demographic and political variables predict motives for following political leaders on Instagram?

Method

Sample

This exploratory uses and gratifications study is part of a larger project to investigate political Instagram use. Recruitment focused on attracting politically engaged Instagram users. From March to September 2017, Instagram users were asked to click on an online link to “a quick academic survey on your political Instagram use.” Several convenience sampling techniques spread the word about the survey. The researchers paid for ads on Instagram, which were targeted at users who match the following interests and politics: Democrats, American Independent Party, Liberal Democrats, Democratic Progressive Party, Republican Party (United States), Democratic Party (United States), Libertarian Party (United States), US politics (very liberal), US politics (liberal), US politics (moderate), US politics (conservative), US politics (very conservative), likely to engage with political content (conservative), or likely to engage with political content (liberal).

Other recruitment included contacting elected officials, politically interested individuals, and groups with accounts on Instagram who represent Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals, moderates, independents, and libertarians. Those who posted about the survey include the account for the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics; John C. Drew, a political scientist and consultant; Nansen Malin, co-owner of MR Data Corp. and political activist; and Farooq Mughal, managing partner of MS Global Partners and political consultant. In addition, hashtags used in Instagram posts about the survey were meant to expand the ideological diversity of who saw the request. The hashtags included #democrat, #progressive, #republican, #conservative, #libertarian,
and #centrist. Convenience sampling is common among surveys of social media and Internet use (Johnson et al., 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Macafau, 2013; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Phua et al., 2017). Random sampling was not possible in the study, because no list exists of the population that includes those who follow political leaders on Instagram.

The survey included a consent statement informing participants of their rights, such as the right to stop at any time and the assurance that their answers would be confidential to the extent provided by law. They were also told not to take the survey unless they follow at least one political leader on Instagram and are at least 18 years old. To guard against anyone submitting a survey more than once, on accident or on purpose, a “thank you” message appeared after they hit the “submit” button. Also, the computer system that the online survey was on allowed participants to submit only once on their registered Internet account. A university Institutional Review Board approved the protocol for the survey. None of the participants received compensation. The sample includes 309 respondents who follow at least one political leader on Instagram and are at least 18 years of age. Cases of missing data are indicated throughout the article.

Measures

The survey consisted of 16 questions, which could be answered in about 10 min. Participants were asked how many political leaders they currently follow on Instagram, with “political leader” defined as “a person or a political organization” and “following” defined as “you chose to get their Instagram posts sent to you.” Options to choose from were 0, 1, 2–4, 5–10, 11–20, and more than 20. Participants were also asked “what types of political leaders do you follow on Instagram?” They were told to select all that apply from the following list: individuals who are currently elected officials, individuals who were previously elected officials, and individuals who have never been elected officials.

To measure the motives for following political leaders on Instagram, a 20-item index was constructed that is based on past uses and gratifications research on the political uses of social media and the Internet generally (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Participants responded to statements using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (American National Election Studies [ANES], 2010); likelihood of voting in the 2018 election (1 = very high likelihood; 10 = very low likelihood; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012); political ideology (1 = strongly conservative; 2 = slightly conservative; 3 = moderate/middle of the road; 4 = slightly liberal; 5 = strongly liberal); and political affiliation (1 = strong Democrat; 2 = lean toward Democrat; 3 = strong Republican; 4 = lean toward Republican; 5 = independent; 6 = other) (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004). The ideology response scale was adapted slightly from a previous ANES (2016) study. Past voting behavior was determined by asking respondents if they voted in the 2016 general election (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Respondents also were asked demographic questions, including their age, gender, race, income, and education.

Results

In terms of the demographics of the respondents, 68.2% are male, while 31.8% are female (N = 305). Most respondents, 62.6%, are 18–24 years old, with 31.1% aged 25–60, and 6.2% aged 61 and above (N = 305). The sample includes 77.6% Caucasian (non-Hispanic), 7.9% Hispanic, 3.6% African American, 2.3% Asian, and 8.6% who identified as other (N = 304). Household income levels include 27.1% who make less than US$25,000 a year, 25.4% who make between US$25,000 and US$65,000, 24.8% who make more than US$100,000, and 22.8% who make between US$65,001 and US$100,000 (N = 303). In terms of education, 53.8% have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

The large number of young respondents is consistent with previous findings that “Instagram use is especially high among younger adults” (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). The study’s sample has a larger percentage of males than is found in surveys of general Instagram use (Greenwood et al., 2016; Sheldon et al., 2017). However, many surveys of the political uses of social media and the Internet include
more men than women (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), even when women’s general use is higher than it is for men. This may result from women being less likely to have a general interest in politics or a desire to engage in collective activism (Campbell & Winters, 2008; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

Respondents also reported high levels of political participation, with 82% having voted in the 2016 US general election (N = 304), and 88.9% indicating there is a “very high likelihood” of them voting in 2018 (N = 305). Politically, the sample included 21.2% (65) who are strong/lean toward Democrat, 52% (159) who are strong/lean toward Republican, 15.4% (47) independent, and 11.4% (35) other (N = 306). Ideologically, 59.7% (182) are strong or slightly conservative, 26.6% (81) are strong or slightly liberal, and 13.8% (42) are moderate/middle of the road (N = 305). The respondents were generally highly interested in politics (M = 4.49 on a 5-point scale, SD = 0.76, N = 301), showed high levels of political efficacy (M = 8.66, 10-point index of the two survey items, SD = 1.84, N = 299), and had limited trust in the government (M = 5.09, 10-point index of the two survey items, SD = 2.06, N = 301).

RQ1 examined to what degree Instagram users follow political leaders who are currently elected officials, individuals who were previously elected officials, and individuals who have never been elected officials. Survey participants followed all three categories of political leaders. However, the vast majority chose to follow current elected officials (80%). Only slightly more than 40% followed previously elected officials, and a little more than a third of the participants followed individuals who have never been elected to office (see Table 1).

RQ2 examined the most important motives for following political leaders on Instagram. The motives were measured using a 20-item survey scale, then principal component analysis was performed to reduce the number of variables. Items with loadings above 0.60 were assigned to factors. The following three items were removed due to insufficient loadings: “to find specific political information I am looking for,” “to share the information I receive with others,” and “for unbiased viewpoints.” The rest of the items loaded in five factors, which accounted for 61.19% of the variance (see Table 2).

The first factor, information/guidance, consisted of four variables. The information/guidance factor accounted for 24.98% of the variance. The four variables that loaded under this factor achieved Cronbach’s alpha of 0.78. These findings suggest that information/guidance is the main motive for following political leaders on Instagram, with the most salient reasons being “to help me decide about important issues” and “to help me decide how to vote.” Other reasons include “to find out more information about the political leader” and “to keep up with issues of the day.”

The second factor, social utility, consisted of four items and accounted for 13.88% of variance. The Cronbach’s alpha for these four items was 0.67. Social utility for the respondents involves using Instagram posts to assist in various social interactions online and offline, such as “to give me something to talk about with others.”

The third factor, entertainment, includes three variables that explained 10.46% of the variance. The index of these three items had 0.83 Cronbach’s alpha. This motive is based on using Instagram politically because “it is fun” and “entertaining.” The fourth factor, convenience, consisted of three variables and accounted for 6.3% of the variance. The items in this grouping achieved 0.83 Cronbach’s alpha. Convenience includes using Instagram because it is “easy” and “cheap” to obtain.

Finally, the fifth factor, self-expression, consisted of three variables, which accounted for 5.58% of the variance. The index of these three items achieved 0.68 Cronbach’s alpha. Self-expression involves respondents choosing Instagram as a vehicle to make their views known to political leaders and fellow Instagram users.

RQ3 examined whether there were statistically significant relationships between the motives and political variables (interest in politics, political efficacy, past voting behavior, future voting behavior and political ideology), and demographic variables (gender, age, race, income, and education).

A series of Spearman’s correlation and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted for this purpose. The correlation analysis revealed weak, but statistically significant relationships between the motives and some of the political and demographic variables (see Table 3). Positive and statistically significant relationships were found between political efficacy and convenience (r = .125, p < .05), political efficacy and self-expression (r = .157, p < .01), and political efficacy and social utility (r = .119, p < .05). Similarly, a positive correlation was found between interest in politics and convenience (r = .116, p < .05) and interest in politics and self-expression

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**Table 1. Types of Political Leaders That Instagram Users Follow.**

| Type of a political leader                          | Number of survey respondents following each type of leader | %     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Individuals who are currently elected officials     | 246                                                       | 80%   |
| Individuals who were previously elected officials   | 131                                                       | 43%   |
| Individuals who have never been elected officials   | 106                                                       | 34%   |

N = 308, missing data = 1.
*Each person had an option of selecting more than one type of leader.

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This means that the more politically efficacious and more interested in politics respondents were the more likely they were to follow political leaders on Instagram for convenience and self-expression reasons. Also, more politically efficacious individuals were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for social utility reasons.

At the same time, a negative and statistically significant relationship emerged between voting in the 2016 elections and entertainment (r = −.140, p < .05) motive. Those who voted in the 2016 election were less likely to follow political leaders for entertainment reasons.

Gender had a significant relationship with social utility (r = −.252, p < .01) and entertainment (r = −.209, p < .01). Males were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for social utility and entertainment reasons.

One-way ANOVA tests detected a number of statistically significant relationships between the motives and political and demographic variables. A significant relationship was found between age and social utility motives, F(5, 293) = 2.41, p < .05. A follow-up Tukey’s honestly significant difference (HSD) test did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the specific groups. Also, a

### Table 2. Motivations for Following Political Leaders on Instagram.

| I follow political leaders on Instagram . . . | Factors |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|
|                                              | 1   | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    |
| Factor 1: Information/guidance                |     |      |      |      |      |
| To keep up with issues of the day             | .636 | .051 | .013 | .331 | .141 |
| To find out more information about the political leader | .674 | −.026 | .064 | .130 | .114 |
| To help me decide about important issues      | .849 | .038 | .017 | .061 | .064 |
| To help me decide how to vote                 | .798 | .064 | .050 | .106 | .034 |
| Factor 2: Social utility                      |     |      |      |      |      |
| To give me something to talk about with others| −.091 | .754 | .088 | .167 | .121 |
| To give me something to post about with others| −.037 | .625 | .077 | .022 | .248 |
| To use as ammunition in arguments with others | .154 | .708 | .149 | .066 | .048 |
| To criticize the political leader             | .174 | .608 | .104 | −.264 | −.084 |
| Factor 3: Entertainment                       |     |      |      |      |      |
| To pass time when bored                       | −.036 | .203 | .747 | .226 | −.080 |
| Because it is entertaining                     | .056 | .143 | .917 | .034 | .045 |
| Because it is fun                             | .033 | .059 | .863 | .030 | .153 |
| Factor 4: Convenience                         |     |      |      |      |      |
| To access information quickly                 | .487 | .064 | −.066 | .672 | .150 |
| Because the information is easy to obtain     | .292 | −.020 | .118 | .857 | .060 |
| Because the information is cheap to obtain    | .245 | .125 | .305 | .744 | −.043 |
| Factor 5: Self-expression                     |     |      |      |      |      |
| To engage in discussion with the political leader | .065 | .262 | −.006 | −.100 | .621 |
| To communicate support for the political leader | .116 | .021 | .088 | .068 | .773 |
| To communicate with supporters of the political leader | .122 | .257 | .137 | .065 | .741 |
| Eigenvalue                                    | 4.995 | 2.776 | 2.092 | 1.259 | 1.116 |
| Variance explained                            | 24.98% | 13.88% | 10.46% | 6.30% | 5.58% |

N = 289 (The total survey sample included 309 respondents. However, some variables had missing data). Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

### Table 3. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Political and Demographic Variables.

| Variable                        | Information/guidance | Social utility | Entertainment | Convenience | Self-expression |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Political interest              | −.032                | .104          | −.005         | .116*       | .177**          |
| Political efficacy              | .017                 | .119*         | .081          | .125*       | .157**          |
| Trust                           | .067                 | .078          | .110          | .050        | .060            |
| Voting in 2016                  | −.015                | −.061         | −.140*        | −.015       | .077            |
| Future voting in 2018           | −.058                | .046          | .091          | −.051       | −.047           |
| Gender                          | .080                 | −.252**       | −.209**       | .003        | −.060           |

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

(r = .177, p < .01). This means that the more political efficacious and more interested in politics respondents were the more likely they were to follow political leaders on Instagram for convenience and self-expression reasons. Also, more politically efficacious individuals were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for social utility reasons.

At the same time, a negative and statistically significant relationship emerged between voting in the 2016 elections and entertainment (r = −.140, p < .05) motive. Those who voted in the 2016 election were less likely to follow political leaders for entertainment reasons.
significant relationship existed between age and entertainment motives, $F(5, 289)=5.06$. A follow-up Tukey’s HSD test revealed that 18 to 24-year-olds ($M=11.45, SD=3.38$), 25 to 30-year-olds ($M=10.78, SD=2.32$), and 31 to 40-year-olds ($M=10.73, SD=2.99$) were significantly more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for entertainment purposes than those who were above 60 years old ($M=7.67, SD=3.61$).

Also, a statistically significant relationship existed between age and self-expression, $F(5, 294)=3.19$. A follow-up Tukey’s HSD test revealed that 18 to 24-year-olds ($M=10.76, SD=2.81$) were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for self-expression reasons than 51 to 60-year-olds ($M=8.58, SD=3.2$).

A statistically significant relationship also existed between income and convenience, $F(3, 289)=5.89$. A follow-up Tukey’s HSD test demonstrated that respondents with incomes lower than US$25,000 ($M=12.01, SD=2.97$) and between US$25,000 and US$65,000 ($M=11.88, SD=2.66$) were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for convenience reasons than those who made US$65,001–US$100,000 ($M=10.5, SD=3.29$) and US$100,000 or more a year ($M=10.39, SD=3.36$).

A statistically significant relationship existed between education and self-expression, $F(4, 294)=2.75$. However, Tukey’s HSD test did not show any statistically significant differences between the specific groups. A statistically significant relationship was found between race and entertainment motives, $F(4, 289)=2.64$. However, Tukey’s HSD tests did not reveal any statistically significant differences between specific racial groups.

RQ4 examined the extent to which demographic and political variables predict motives for following political leaders on Instagram. To answer this question, the researchers first transformed a number of categorical variables into dummy variables: race (1—Caucasian, 0—other), age (1—40 years or younger, 0—older than 41), and education (1—bachelor degree or higher, 0—less than a bachelor degree). Then a number of hierarchical regression tests were performed (see Table 4). The demographic block of variables was entered first followed by political variables. The results indicated that gender, age, education, and interest in politics predicted three of the five motives for following political leaders on Instagram.

**Social Utility**

Gender ($B=-1.539, p<.01$) predicted social utility motivation ($R^2=.088, p<.01$) in the full model that included both demographic and a series of political variables. Males tended to use Instagram more often for social utility purposes than females. The demographic block of variables explained 6.5% of variance, while the block of demographic and political variables explained 8.8% of variance.

**Entertainment**

Males ($B=-.947, p<.05$) and people 40 years old and younger ($B=1.797, p<.01$) used Instagram more often for entertainment reasons than females and older adults. The demographic block in this model accounted for 10% of the variance, while demographic and political variables explained 13.4% variance.

**Self-expression**

Education ($B=-.727, p<.05$) and interest in politics ($B=.548, p<.05$) predicted self-expression motive in the full model. People with less than a bachelor degree and those who are more interested in politics used Instagram more often for self-expression than those with bachelor or higher degrees and less interested in politics. The demographic and political variables explained 6.7% of the variance.

Finally, the researchers ran a separate set of multiple regression tests to examine whether there were differences in the motives of Democrats and Republicans for following political leaders on Instagram. The sample only included those who identified themselves as Republicans (1) or Democrats (0). Independents and supporters of other parties were excluded from the sample. The results indicated that party affiliation was not a statistically significant predictor of the motives (see Table 5).

**Discussion**

Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson (2016) argue that “Instagram providing both visuals and text might be an effective campaign tool to get voters to pay (more) attention to campaign messages” (p. 8). The survey results presented here show that Instagram has the potential to be a useful political tool if leaders use it in ways that address followers’ motives. Respondents indicated that their primary motives for following political leaders on Instagram are for information and guidance. This finding suggests that many followers are receptive to having political Instagram posts guide their voting decisions and political views. Respondents also consider Instagram to be a key news source to stay current on issues and candidates.

Respondents’ strong information-seeking and guidance motives suggest that political leaders would be wise to be more active on Instagram and focus on providing a steady stream of political news, opinion, personal interests, and other information. The visual nature of Instagram may account for the high level of information-seeking. Instagram posts are visually rich, with short-form videos and photos that often have the color balance and contrast altered by filtering options to grab viewers’ attention. Imaginative imagery in a political context is known to attract viewers and influence their political behavior (Brader, 2005; Graber, 1996). The distinctive visual
elements of Instagram may make the information in the posts especially compelling, which leads followers to have information-seeking motives.

The dominance of information/guidance motives for political Instagram use matches what past research has found concerning why individuals access blogs for political

### Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors for Following Instagram Political Leaders.

| Predictor variables | Information/guidance | Social utility | Entertainment | Convenience | Self-expression |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|
|                     | Model 1       | Model 2       | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2       | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2     |
| Gender (female—1, male—0) | .821      | .896          | -1.726***    | -1.539**   | -1.067*      | -0.947*      | .164          | .363        | .092          | .312        |                        |
| Race (1—Caucasian, 0—other) | -.739     | -.744         | -.534        | .562       | .690         | .706         | .533          | .435        | -.169        | -.277       |                        |
| Age (1—40 and under, 0—other) | .339      | .269          | .765         | .673       | 2.023***     | 1.797**      | .534          | .503        | .763          | .878        |                        |
| Education            | -.645      | -.648         | -.209        | .314       | -.337        | -.254        | -.567         | -.722       | -.345        | -.727*       |                        |
| Interest in politics | -.393      | .318          | -.198        | .307       | .307         | .548*        | .221          | .185        |                        |             |                        |
| Efficacy             | .124       | .189          | .144         | .221       | .185         | .185         | .221          | .185        |                        |             |                        |
| Trust                | .131       | .096          | .127         | .092       | .188         | -.007        | .085          |             |                        |             |                        |
| Vote 2016            | -.150      | -.416         | -.796        | -.215      | .760         | .878         | .760          | .878        | .760         | .878        |                        |
| Vote 2018            | -.084      | .153          | .188         | -.007      | .085         |             | .085          |             |             |             |                        |
| $R^2$                | .024       | .040          | .065**       | .088**     | .100***      | .134***      | .018          | .044        | .016          | .067*        |                        |
| Adjusted R           | .012       | .009          | .052         | .058       | .087         | .105         | .004          | .012        | .002          | .037         |                        |
| F                    | 1.878      | 1.275         | 4.891        | 2.965      | 7.764        | 4.698        | 1.288         | 1.394       | 1.159         | 2.209        |                        |
| N                   | 284        | 284           | 286          | 286        | 284          | 284          | 284           | 288         | 288           | 288          |                        |

*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.
****The total survey sample included 309 respondents. However, some variables had missing data, which is indicated in the table.

### Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors for Following Instagram Political Leaders.

| Predictor variables | Information/guidance | Social utility | Entertainment | Convenience | Self-expression |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|
|                     | Model 1       | Model 2       | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2       | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2     | Model 1       | Model 2     |
| Gender (female—1, male—0) | .801      | .804          | -1.485**     | -1.468*    | -.653        | -.502        | .094          | .095        | -.052        | -.138        |                        |
| Race (1—Caucasian, 0—other) | -.373     | -.265         | -.781        | -.635      | .475         | .658         | .332          | .351        | -.303        | -.372        |                        |
| Age (1—digital natives, 0—other) | .456      | .220          | .936         | .632       | 2.386***     | 2.063**      | .365          | .085        | .270          | .319        |                        |
| Education            | -.690      | -.729         | -.030        | -.163      | -.520        | -.243        | -.433         | -.485       | -.181        | -.656        |                        |
| Interest in politics | -.348      | .100          | -.289        | .386       | .724         | .724         | .724          | .724        | .724         | .724         |                        |
| Efficacy             | .191       | .293*         | .121         | .206       | .191         | .191         | .191          | .191        | .191         | .191         |                        |
| Trust                | .164       | .210          | .139         | .089       | .176         | .176         | .176          | .176        | .176         | .176         |                        |
| Vote 2016            | -.296      | -.642         | -1.288       | -.921      | .608         | .608         | .608          | .608        | .608         | .608         |                        |
| Vote 2018            | .046       | .134          | .236         | .154       | .104         | .104         | .104          | .104        | .104         | .104         |                        |
| Party ID (1—Rep, 0—Dem.) | -.704     | -.823         | .321         | -.462      | -.299        | -.299        | -.299         | -.299       | -.299        | -.299        |                        |
| $R^2$                | .024       | .053          | .067**       | .119**     | .101***      | .150***      | .008          | .054        | .005          | .082        |                        |
| Adjusted R           | .005       | .005          | .049         | .075       | .083         | .106         | -.011         | .006        | -.015        | .036         |                        |
| F                    | 1.242      | 1.098         | 3.665        | 2.671      | 5.645        | 3.455        | 4.26          | 1.313       | 2.33          | 1.783        |                        |
| N                   | 209        | 209           | 208          | 208        | 207          | 207          | 208           | 208         | 211          | 211          |                        |

*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.
****This table only includes analysis for Democrats and Republicans. Political affiliation variable is coded as (1—Republican, 0—Democrat). The table includes political affiliation variable.
information and visit political websites (Johnson et al., 2007; Kaye, 2005; Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2006). YouTube is also used for informational reasons when viewing traditional news content (Haridakis & Hanson, 2008). So when it comes to political uses and gratifications, it seems that Instagram has much in common with blogs, political websites, and YouTube. The primary motive for following political leaders on Instagram is different from the main motives for more general uses of Instagram, which are for self-promotion and social interaction (Sheldon et al., 2017).

The fact that respondents in this study found social utility to be the next most important motive for following political leaders on Instagram suggests that Instagram is also somewhat similar to other types of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social utility was found to be the main motive for following political leaders on Twitter (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), though that study found information/guidance to be ranked fourth overall. Social motives are also high on the list of reasons for political Facebook use (Macafee, 2013). Social utility refers to seeking out certain media platforms because they can be resources when interacting online or offline with friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Despite social utility not being the primary motive for political Instagram use, political leaders can still benefit by understanding that their followers like to use the information in Instagram posts when talking politics with friends and family. As a result, leaders should ensure that their Instagram posts include visual and verbal information that followers can use as ammunition in political discussions.

On the other hand, self-expression being the least cited motive in the survey suggests that followers have little interest in engaging in two-way communication with political leaders on Instagram and are satisfied with one-way communication from politicians. This finding shows how Instagram is different from Twitter when it comes to following political leaders. Self-expression ranked third out of five on the list of motives for political Twitter use, and many people in that survey who were subsequently interviewed qualitatively expressed their wish to interact more with the leaders they follow (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Interestingly, self-expression is the lowest motivation for accessing blogs for political news and information (Kaye, 2005), which is one more indication that blogs and Instagram are used in similar ways for politics.

The relative importance of the entertainment motive for political Instagram users is worth further discussion. Entertainment was the third most cited motive in the survey. This is consistent with how other forms of social media are used politically. On Facebook, entertainment ranked second as the motive for posting political comments and status updates, and it ranked third for posting links to political news stories (Macafee, 2013). On Twitter, entertainment placed second as the motive for following political leaders (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). One study on political YouTube use ranked entertainment the top motive (Hanson et al., 2011).

While some may argue that having an entertainment motive for following leaders on Instagram suggests that political Instagram posts are not taken seriously, there are alternative explanations. Instagram posts often use humor to make political points, and the survey respondents may be reacting to that. Political news as delivered by newspapers and television can be so negative that the respondents may actively seek alternative information platforms, such as Instagram, to get a more light-hearted take on the current political environment. Being attracted to humorously delivered political information is common among young adults (Parmelee, Perkins, & Sayre, 2007), and it is the young who disproportionately use Instagram (Greenwood et al., 2016). Humor is increasingly used on social media by other age groups as well, such as by journalists who are trying to strengthen connections with their followers (Holton & Lewis, 2011). As a result, political leaders have an interest in including at least some entertaining posts in their feed.

Several demographic and political variables were associated with the motives for following political leaders on Instagram. Males were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for social utility and entertainment reasons. Those with high political efficacy were more likely to follow political leaders on Instagram for social utility reasons. In addition, having an entertainment motive was related to being young and not voting. Those who voted in the 2016 US general election were less likely to follow political leaders for entertainment reasons. Those between 18 and 40 years old follow political leaders on Instagram for entertainment purposes far more than do those who are more than 60 years old. Based on the results, political leaders who want to engage a young audience should send more humorous and entertaining posts, while leaders who are trying to reach senior citizens have less incentive to send entertaining posts. A younger age also predicted entertainment motives to use Twitter for politics (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012, p. 67).

In terms of demographic and political variables that predict motives for following political leaders on Instagram, it is somewhat surprising that males are the most likely to use Instagram politically for social utility reasons. Past research on other online and social media platforms has not found that being male predicts social utility motives for political information (Ancu & Cozma, 2009, p. 576; Kaye & Johnson, 2002, p. 66; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, p. 212; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012, p. 55). Studies on the nonpolitical uses of Instagram do not examine the relationship between motives and gender (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2017). While Sheldon and Bryant’s (2016, p. 95) study on nonpolitical use found that “women are more likely to be active on Instagram as opposed to men,” this study provides an example of how political use of social media can differ considerably from general use. Male dominance of the social utility motive may relate to women being less likely to engage in collective activism and public political contact (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). As a result,
political leaders should be mindful to send plenty of Instagram posts that appeal to men and include information that they would find worth sharing.

The sample of politically active Instagram users was largely White, male, and young, which matches the demographics for some other types of online media. Blogs are used for political news and information more by White males (Johnson et al., 2007; Kaye, 2005), while bulletin boards and electronic mailing lists are used politically more by the young (Kaye & Johnson, 2004, 2006).

Another interesting finding concerns the types of Instagram accounts that are being followed for politics. Instagram can be used politically even by those who have never held elective office, with one in three respondents following such individuals and considering them to be political leaders. As a result, Instagram can be seen as a useful platform for political activities, cable news commentators, talk radio personalities, and other politically interested individuals to reach a receptive audience. Instagram is also worthwhile for former elected officials who want to remain on the political radar, as 43% of respondents follow previously elected officials. While 80% of respondents follow currently elected officials as political leaders, this means that one in five respondents does not bother to follow those who meet the most traditional definition of a political leader.

The survey has several limitations, including a relatively small and nonrandom sample. However, the sample is larger than other surveys on social media and Internet use (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Lee & Ma, 2012; Macafee, 2013) and is more ethnically diverse (Johnson et al., 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The high percentage of Republicans in the sample does not seem to match what little is known about Instagram’s political demographics (Fuller, 2014), which can hinder generalizability of the findings. Recruiting for the survey included paid ads on Instagram that were distributed to a wide ideological spectrum of users. Also, the several political consultants who were asked to post about the survey included both Democrats and Republicans. It should be noted that other political communication surveys of social media also have skewed Republicans (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018; Johnson, Kaye, & Lee, 2017). However, multiple regression tests found that Republicans and Democrats were not statistically different on the variables under study. The instrument used also has weaknesses. Surveys are based on self-reports, which may not accurately reflect respondents’ true thoughts and actions. In addition, the survey was given online, and respondents to such surveys tend to differentiate less on rating scales than when they take face-to-face surveys (Heerwegh & Loosveldt, 2008).

Future surveys should reexamine this topic using a larger sample size that better matches what past research suggests is the ideological makeup of Instagram users (Fuller, 2014). Also, qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, can gain a better understanding of why political Instagram users are motivated primarily by informational and guidance reasons, and what types of visual and verbal information users want to see in political Instagram posts. In addition, quantitative research is needed from an electronic word-of-mouth perspective to measure the degree to which political Instagram posts result in political activity, such as sharing leaders’ posts, liking or tagging leaders’ posts, influencing followers’ political views, voting, or contributing to campaigns. Political Instagram use should also be examined from a selective exposure perspective. Users may be following only those political leaders on Instagram that they agree with and may be walling themselves off from diverse viewpoints, which can be harmful for political discourse and democracy.

While there is clearly more research to do to understand the impact of Instagram on politics, this study lays the foundation by showing that those who follow political leaders’ posts do so primarily for informational and guidance reasons, which suggests that Instagram is considered an important place for political information.

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