

Shaping the Political Self: Gendered Norms and Ideological Differences in Women Politicians' Instagram Content

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*Corresponding Author Email : surbhitandon71@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

In era where political communication has turned into 24X7 vocation, Instagram has emerged as a crucial site for image curation, identity formation and a space for setting political narratives. The study would examine how Instagram is established itself as a significant site for the women politicians especially the women Member of Parliament to construct and communicate their agenda, negotiate their gendered experiences and assertion of their ideologies. The study focuses on three women MPs representing distinct political spaces: one from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one from the principal opposition Indian National Congress (INC), and one from a prominent regional party (Samajwadi Party). Goffman's Framing Theory would form the foundational basis of the study and would help to understand how imagery contributes to the human cognitive abilities to receive, interpret and consume social realities. The qualitative study would study the photographs shared by the three women politicians on their official Instagram account for six months (January-June, 2025). The study aims to examine and understand Instagram beyond an aesthetic and performative space and analyse its role in curating digital identities of the women politicians.

Keywords: Gender, Instagram, Political Ideology, Political Opinion, Women Politicians**INTRODUCTION**

India has the world's largest Instagram audience with over 413 million users as of February 2025¹. The social networking site has emerged as a crucial for political self representation and providing opportunities for personal branding and storytelling especially for the political class (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Digital Media has brought a significant shift in contemporary politics enabling women politicians to navigate complicated mediascape, enhance their visibility through social networks and challenge established gendered power structures. Previous research has demonstrated that there is a significant need for the women politicians to assert their identity and position themselves as strong and credible leaders while showcasing their feminine traits and emotional characteristics like warmth, kindness and approachability (Jamieson, 1995; Dittmar, 2015). It also showcases that as a social networking site, Instagram has blurred the boundaries between the political and personal lives of the political leadership (Abidin, 2016). Instagram is a platform where the political class is likely to share their political opinions through visuals (both still and moving), policy stances, while simultaneously sharing behind-the-scenes moments, personal milestones, fitness regimes, and family photos (Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017). Earlier works have often demonstrated that conservative women leaders leverage their traditional roles, such as motherhood, to showcase their authority and authenticity. Meanwhile, progressive women have used social networks for activism and challenging patriarchal norms and structures (Ondercin & Welch, 2009; Evans & Clark, 2016).

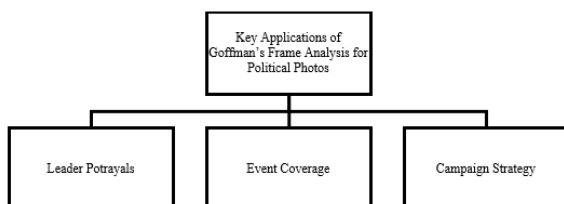
2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of the study are:

- To analyze how women Member of Parliament use Instagram to construct political narratives and curate their public image.
- To identify the gendered roles and identities performed for visual self-representation on Instagram.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK : GOFFMAN'S FRAME ANALYSIS

The theoretical framework of the study pertains itself from Erving Goffman's framing theory provided in his seminal work "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience" published in 1974. The work discusses how individuals make sense of the world around them and address mundane situations. He delved into the questions raised on the philosophical question of how we consider the things that seem real to individuals. He propounded the idea of "frame"—a cognitive structure that is aimed at understanding a situation or eliciting a response or perception. Frames are mental structures that help individuals to categorize their experiences in the real world on the basis of their relevance and interactions. These frames guide the response and perception to social events or experiences. There are two key constructs to understand the frames: a) Keying: It is the process by which frames are transformed or altered or modulated so that they can be reinterpreted. Activities could be altered to give new meanings and interpretations by changing the frame. To cite an example, turning a real fight into a rehearsal for a stage play. b) Fabrication: The theory proposes that frames as a cognitive concept can be manipulated to create a different or new or particular meaning with an intention to sometimes deceive the receivers of the message. To cite an example, a news story on river water pollution can be showcased as an environmental crisis or a result of Anthropocene factors and reckless urbanization, and it may be framed as a "governance failure." Communication scholars Robert Entman (1993) and Todd Gitlin (1980) have extended the theory of Frame Analysis by Erving Goffman to media and communication studies. They believed that the theory is crucial and relevant to understand how journalists and media organizations frame their news stories for public understanding and setting the agenda. The frames served by the media through the news stories and the angle chosen to organize and deliver the stories have the power to influence the way they are interpreted and modulate attitudes towards the issue or development. It is also relevant for political advertisements as the same issue can be framed by different political parties extremely differently, such as the ruling parties may showcase the number of jobs generated for youth during their tenure, while opposition parties may depict the unemployment data and migration data to other countries for employment purposes to demonstrate the government's non-performance. Goffman's framing theory is significant to understand and study political images and photographs as visuals have become crucial and often act as defining visual acts that have the ability to influence public interpretations and opinions. Instagram, which was primarily a photo-sharing platform, has been adopted by politicians as visual frames act as powerful narratives as they share the nuances of their public and private lives with their supporters and other stakeholders in the political arena. Official photographs are released by the government as well as from the political parties as they understand that photographs aid in the interpretation of political events, leaders, and issues—carefully curated and highlighting certain elements while ignoring others. Through their composition, emphasis, and exclusion, photographs serve manifold functions, including the ability to influence viewer perceptions. Cropping, lighting, staging, and using other elements of editing an image may lead the audience to interpret a frame or a scene from a specific perspective and invoke various interpretations, such as a leader being authoritative, popular, vulnerable, accessible, or powerful. Some of the key applications of the framing analysis in the deconstruction of political photos could be for leader portrayals, event coverage, and campaign strategy.

¹<https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/>

Thus, the Goffman’s Frame Analysis has been utilised for the theoretical foregrounding of the research paper. We have taken into account the photographs shared by three women parliamentarians on Instagram verified account from January - July, 2025.

4 Research design of the STUDY

The study adopts a qualitative and visual thematic analysis approach to examine the photographic content posted by three selected women Members of Parliament, each representing different political parties and ideologies—Ms. Bansuri Swaraj, MP from New Delhi (Delhi) (BJP); Ms. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, MP from Wayanad (Kerala) (INC); and Ms. Iqra Choudhary, MP from Kairana (Uttar Pradesh) (Samajwadi Party)—on their official Instagram accounts during the period from January to July 2025. The study’s theoretical framework has been drawn from Goffman’s Framing Theory, which provides a critical lens to understand how images operate as cognitive frames and references, and is directly related to the audience perception and interpretation of the political realities.

5 Findings of the STUDY

Table 1 : Thematic Analysis of the Photographic and Graphic Posts of Ms. Bansuri Swaraj (January - July, 2025)

Broad Themes	Interpretation based on Photos and Graphics
Cultural Nationalism and Assertion of Religious affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Display of the Indian Flag/tricolour across events (Tiranga Yatra) and her vociferous support to Operation Sindoor, Participation in India Speakers’ Conference on 100th anniversary of freedom fighter Vitthalbhai Patel becoming the first elected Indian President of the Central Legislative, Examining the preparations for the Celebration of Ahilya Bai Holkar’s 300th birth anniversary. ● Frames her identity as a cultural nationalist and asserts her religious identity aligned with BJP’s ideological positioning.
Women’s Leadership and Gendered Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation in UN Women’s functions on women leadership and electoral campaigning. Cross-party photograph captioned “Sisters in Service” with other women MPs, Meetings with women entrepreneurs (Trader’s Dignity Yatra), Felicitating of women party workers, emphasizing grassroots empowerment.
Personal Legacy and Emotional Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Posts remembering her mother, Smt. Sushma Swaraj, with emotional reflections and celebrating her mother’s contribution to Indian politics, Family photographs with her father, birthday celebrations, campaign trail ● Creates a blend of private and public persona, reinforcing her political identity through legacy and emotional capital. Also reflects the dynasty politics in BJP
Constituency Engagement& Grassroots politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen services launched in New Delhi, Engagements with traders, trade unions, and youth groups , Addressing local governance issues (Delhi-Punjab water relations), Meeting with Union Minister Nitin Gadkari and Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena highlighting local concerns.
International Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Part of the All-Party Diplomatic Delegation after Operation Sindoor, Frames herself as part of India’s global leadership narrative and diplomacy.
Modernity, Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of Ghibli Trends (symbolizing tech-savviness) to showcase her personal and professional milestones like Meeting the President of India, Home Minister and family photos. Positioning herself as a modern leader blending tradition and innovation.

Table 2 : Thematic Analysis of the Photographic and Graphic Posts of Ms. Iqra Choudhary (January - July, 2025)

Broad Themes	Interpretation based on Photos and Graphics
Constituency Engagement and Grassroots Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Janta Durbars in Gangoh and Thana Bhawan; directly listening to locals’ grievances, Meetings with the DM of Saharanpur and instructing local officials for the to resolve civic issues and citizens’ issues. ● Inauguration of Regional Inter College in Thana Bhawan (Part of Constituency), Screening of Phule movie in Kairana, linking cultural events to constituency mobilization. ● Focus on resolving public concerns and responsiveness through repeated posts
Political Legacy and Emotional Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Remembering her father, Chaudhary Munnawar Hasan, a former MP, at the Constitution Club’s rally for road accident victims. ● Blending personal loss and political identity, showcasing continuity of family’s public service and dynasty politics in India’s regional parties
Secularism and Harmony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation in Eid Milan and Muharram procession, Paying obeisance at a Gurudwara in Cheema, Inaugurated camp for Kavay Yatris and Shiv Bhaktas in her constituency in different locations ● Careful calibration of her identity as a Muslim MP while advocating secularism, interfaith harmony, brotherhood and constitutional values.
Muslim Identity & National Duty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Long post on Pahalgam attacks in Jammu and Kashmir—asserting grief, addressing Islamophobia, advocating for restraint, peace, justice for the victims , Meeting with the Shahi Imam of Punjab ● Balances minority identity with nationalism, fraternity, strong stand terrorism
Women’s Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Posts saluting Col. Sofia Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh during Operation Sindoor—hailing women empowerment, supporting women’s leadership in India’s Defence Forces
Cultural and Ideological Symbolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation in Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations, aligning with her party’s PDA (Pichda, Dalit, Adivasi) agenda, Republic Day flag hoisting ceremonies in multiple locations in her constituency showcasing constitutional values and duties
Institutional Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting with Akhilesh Yadav, party president of Samajwadi Party, signaling loyalty and importance of the organizational hierarchy and structure. ● Committee on Estimates study visit to Mumbai—embodiment of parliamentary responsibilities and different facets of being a legislator

Table 3 : Thematic Analysis of the Photographic and Graphic Posts of Ms. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra (January - July, 2025)

Broad Themes	Interpretation based on Photos and Graphics
Upholding Citizens’ Rights and Commitment to Constitution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protest against ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar and showcasing herself as the Protector of Citizens Rights and upholding Constitution, Holding the Constitution during rallies in Karnataka and emphasizing on party’s Rights based approach and guardian of the sacred document
Sensitive to International Issues and Peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Graphic posts condemning Indian government’s abstention at UN on Gaza motion, Posts on the alleged killing of civilians and children in Gaza by Israel. ● Frames her identity as a leader sensitive to international justice, staunch advocate of Human Rights and keen interest in India’s diplomatic relations
Party Legacy and Institutional Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Celebration of 100th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s election as Congress President in Belagavi, Showcasing the new Congress Headquarters ‘Indira Bhawan’ in New Delhi ● Consciously posits Congress Party’s contribution to India’s freedom struggle, focusing on its 140 year legacy of the party and associating herself and Gandhi family with political lineage
Role within INC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Press note on Operation Sindoor and instructions to party’s office bearers embracing her position and role in Indian National Congress
Political Campaigning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Active role in political rallies with other top leadership including Rahul Gandhi and Revant Reddy in Telangana, Posts on different festivals to wish followers and party workers
Empathetic Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Condolence post for Valmik Thapar (nature and Tiger conservationist) reflecting her personal connect, environmental sensitivity and leadership with a cause

4 Interpretation of the findings

The findings of the study reveal that Instagram serves as a strategic tool for the women politicians serving a multitude of functions which include political communication and assertion of their gendered identity. Based on Goffman's Framing theory, we can analyse that politicians are carefully calibrating and curating their digital identities while simultaneously pushing their political ideologies and agendas in the country's complex, chaotic and multi-party political landscape.

The study reveals three broad themes based on the findings of the Instagram content of the selected women politicians:

a) Seeking a balance between Party Ideology and Personal Branding

i. Bansuri Swaraj : The feed analysis for the BJP MP showcases her attempt to balance the core tenets of the party's ideology that focuses on cultural nationalism and modernity while embracing her mother's legacy in Indian politics. She demonstrates her modern and technology-savvy identity through her posts showcasing her milestones through Ghibli trends. Her post based on "sisters in solidarity" showcased her gendered solidarity with her colleagues in the Parliament but while following the party protocols and ideology. Her assertion of the religious identity is aligned with the BJP's narrative of Viksit Bharat @ 2047 but strongly rooted in India's culture and Indian Knowledge Systems.

ii. Iqra Choudhary : Ms. Choudhary also tries to balance her varied identities through her posts that seeks to assert her as a secular yet not overlooking her Muslim women identity while simultaneously emphasizing on her image as a grassroots leader who delivers and takes care of her constituency while showcasing allegiance to the Indian constitution. Her posts also seek to establish her as an advocate for the rights and upliftment of PDA (Pichda, Dalit, Adivasi) communities while not compromising on her Muslim identity. Her work as a parliamentarian does not try to overlook her role with the party structure and institutional leadership.

iii. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra : She frames her image as not just the custodian of the legacy of the Gandhi family and Congress but as "a leader who cares" by advocating for the delivery of constitutional rights, human rights and international peace and justice. She tries to portray herself as a political leader with strong beliefs in value-based political traditions. She goes beyond the national issues to address complex and contested international issues like her stand on Gaza. However, the absence of other women politicians with Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on stage in her political campaigns and rallies in the photographs also reflects the skewed representation of women in political parties in India especially at the decision-making and leadership levels.

b) Framing the Experiences of a Woman Politician : From Gendered Solidarity to creating an emotional connections to identity negotiations

The study finds that the selected women politicians attempt to transcend the gendered stereotypes and try to transform the debates from "woman politician" to "politician who is a woman." The politicians' posts on "sisters in service" and saluting the efforts of the women leadership in the Indian armed forces during "Operation Sindoor" reflect that they are strategically drifting away from radical feminism to a practical approach, with the aim to assert a strategic sisterhood and collective identity. All three political leaders analyzed in the study try to leverage their political legacy and lineage, which reflects the dynasty-based politics in India, though they try to reframe the narrative with an inherited sense of duty towards the nation and sacrifices for their fellow citizens. They also want to use photographs as a framing tool to invoke a sense of emotion and continuity through their familial connections with their support base. Ms. Choudhary's posts after the Pahalgam attacks are noteworthy, as she attempts to posit her Muslim woman identity while simultaneously using the platform to advocate secularism, counter islamophobia, and work for the cause of minority communities.

c) Instagram as a platform for curating multi-faceted persona beyond Gender Lens

Instagram is being used by the political class in India as a platform for curating a multi-dimensional public-private persona, which includes dynasty and family legacy, personal moments, and political milestones, creating a humanized political persona along with invoking the phenomenon of being "people like us." It helps in building authenticity, trust, and credibility. The feeds reflect a broad spectrum of the work being undertaken by the people's representatives - from understanding the people's grievances and public demands through janta durbars and advocating for their work in various parliamentary committees to representing the country in diplomatic delegations and the UN. It also reflects that Instagram is not just a superficial aesthetic platform for sharing photographs but has become a political tool where a visual political discourse can be curated that goes beyond gender and includes public policy issues, parliamentary work, and ideological battles.

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