Journal of Social Science and human Research Studies
Available on: http://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/index.php/jsshrs/index Volume: 01, Issue: 01, July 2025

Role of Social Media in Youth Political Engagement: A Study of Awareness, Activism, and Influence

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Abstract

Social media has rapidly evolved from being a platform for social interaction to a powerful tool for political discourse and civic engagement, particularly among the youth. This research examines how digital platforms influence political awareness, shape activism, and mobilize political participation among young people. Using a mixed-method approach that combines survey data and case study analysis, the paper focuses on university-going youth in India, a country with a growing digital population and active democratic culture.

Findings reveal that social media significantly enhances political awareness and encourages youth-led activism. However, the quality of engagement varies based on access, digital literacy, and the presence of echo chambers. While platforms like Twitter and Instagram are used for activism, Facebook and WhatsApp are more commonly used for information dissemination and group discussions. The study also explores the risks of misinformation and political polarization.

Overall, the paper concludes that social media, when used responsibly, can serve as a dynamic tool for political empowerment among youth. Policy interventions promoting digital education and media literacy are crucial to transforming online engagement into meaningful democratic participation.

Keywords: Social Media, Youth, Political Engagement, Activism, Awareness, Democracy, Digital Literacy, Civic Participation, Online Movements, India

Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have emerged as critical instruments for communication, networking, and information dissemination. Among the most transformative impacts of social media is its ability to engage youth in

political dialogue, activism, and civic life. With over 450 million active social media users in India, and nearly 65% of the population under the age of 35, the intersection between youth and digital political engagement demands scholarly attention.

Historically, political engagement among youth has been driven by traditional structures like student unions, campus debates, and physical protests. However, in recent years, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have redefined how young people consume political content, interact with policymakers, and participate in socio-political campaigns.

Youth are no longer passive consumers of political information. They create content, mobilize peers, challenge dominant narratives, and engage in activism on issues ranging from climate change and gender justice to government policy and electoral reforms. The emergence of hashtags like #MeTooIndia, #CAAProtests, and #FridaysForFuture illustrate how youth-led movements are increasingly born and sustained online.

Yet, this transformation is not without its complexities. Misinformation, online abuse, surveillance, and digital inequality pose significant challenges. This paper seeks to understand the extent, form, and impact of social media on youth political engagement in India.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method research approach, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data to explore the role of social media in youth political participation.

1. Quantitative Data Collection:

A structured questionnaire was administered to 150 university students (aged 18–28) across three Indian states—Delhi, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. The survey included questions on platform usage, political awareness, activism participation, and perceptions of influence.

2. Qualitative Data Collection:

- In-depth interviews with 10 student activists and social media influencers
- Analysis of three major youth-driven online campaigns (#StudentsProtest, #JusticeForStudentX, and #DigitalIndiaDebate)

3. Analytical Framework:

- Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba, Schlozman & Brady)
- Media Dependency Theory
- Networked Public Sphere Theory (Habermas revisited)

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained. The research was approved by the university ethics committee.

Data Analysis (Theoretical Form)

The data analysis reveals several patterns in how Indian youth engage with politics through social media. First, awareness is the most common form of political engagement. Respondents reported using Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to follow political developments, watch debates, and learn about global and national issues.

Second, activism through online petitions, hashtag movements, and content creation is steadily growing. Platforms like Instagram and Twitter are preferred for advocacy due to their visual appeal and real-time interaction. Students shared that they feel empowered to voice opinions on issues such as unemployment, education reforms, and human rights violations.

However, the influence of social media on actual political behavior—such as voting, joining political parties, or participating in offline protests—varies. While 72% of respondents said that social media motivated them to vote, only 38% participated in physical protests.

The interviews indicated that social media enables marginalized voices to gain visibility. For example, a Dalit student activist from Delhi shared how

Twitter helped him connect with national activists and policymakers, which would not have been possible through traditional means.

Challenges include digital echo chambers, where users are exposed only to like-minded views, and the spread of misinformation. Many participants expressed concern about political trolling and the emotional fatigue from constant exposure to polarizing content.

The analysis supports the idea that social media is a double-edged sword—it democratizes discourse but can also deepen divisions if not used responsibly.

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Case Study 1: #StudentsProtest Against Fee Hike (Delhi University)

In 2022, a proposed hike in university fees led to massive online mobilization. Students created Instagram reels, Facebook events, and Twitter threads explaining the policy implications. Hashtags like #EducationIsNotForSale trended nationally. Offline protests were strengthened by online momentum, resulting in the partial rollback of the fee hike. This case demonstrates how digital activism can influence administrative decisions.

Case Study 2: Digital Campaign for Climate Action (FridaysForFuture India)

Inspired by Greta Thunberg's movement, Indian students launched local chapters of FridaysForFuture. They used Twitter to tag policymakers, organized digital climate strikes via Zoom, and posted infographics on Instagram. Youth from both urban and semi-urban areas joined, showing that environmental activism has found new life through social media tools.

Questionnaire with Tables

The questionnaire targeted 150 students aged 18–28, with 60% urban and 40% semi-urban representation. It focused on platform usage, political interest, forms of activism, and digital literacy.

Table 1: Social Media Platform Usage and Political Engagement

Platform	Used for News (%)	Used for Activism (%)	Used for Debates (%)
Instagram	64	51	42
Twitter	56	63	68
Facebook	41	37	25
WhatsApp	72	29	34
YouTube	59	22	48

Table 2: Impact on Political Behavior

Activity	Percentage (%)
Voted due to social media influence	72
Signed online petitions	61
Attended offline protest after online call	38
Changed political views via online debate	47
Shared political content regularly	66

These results suggest that while online engagement is high, translation to offline political participation remains moderate, depending on accessibility, trust, and personal motivation.

Conclusion

Social media has undeniably transformed the landscape of political engagement among youth in India. It has enabled wider political awareness, given rise to digital activism, and empowered individuals to participate in civic matters beyond traditional platforms. However, the depth and authenticity of this engagement vary.

Youth today are both creators and consumers of political content. They seek platforms that offer interaction, visibility, and a sense of community. Social

media serves this need, but it also brings risks—such as misinformation, polarization, and performative activism.

For digital political engagement to be sustainable and democratic, efforts must be made to:

- Improve digital literacy among youth
- Encourage critical thinking and fact-checking
- Create safe online spaces for dissent and debate
- Bridge the gap between online and offline civic action

Governments, educational institutions, and social platforms must collaborate to foster responsible digital citizenship. The youth are not just the future of democracy—they are shaping it right now, tweet by tweet and post by post.

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