



Youth and Social Media: Exploring Digital Engagement and Nation Building

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, social media has become an inseparable part of youth life, profoundly influencing their identity, communication patterns, civic engagement, and socio-political awareness. In today's digital era, social media is a powerful force shaping the identities, beliefs, and actions of young individuals. With the largest youth population in the world, India witnesses widespread social media use that is redefining participation in civic life and social change. This paper, based on secondary data from existing reports, journals, Government documents, and online surveys, investigates the impact of social media on Indian youth in the context of nation-building. It analyses how platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) are being used for activism, education, entrepreneurship, and political engagement, while also discussing the challenges of misinformation, online toxicity, and digital addiction. The findings highlight both the transformative potential and the threats associated with digital spaces, recommending a roadmap for empowering youth for responsible and meaningful participation in nation-building.

KEY WORDS

Social Media, Youth Engagement, Digital Citizenship, Nation Building, Civic Participation, Online Activism.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century youth are digital natives growing up in a hyperconnected world where social media platforms have become central to their daily interactions. In India, over 75% of internet users are

between the ages of 15 and 34, highlighting the scale of digital engagement among the youth (IAMAI, 2023). Social media is not only a tool for entertainment but also an avenue for youth expression, activism, community building, and civic awareness. As India moves forward in its developmental journey, youth engagement through digital means is increasingly critical for social reform and nation-building.

This paper draws insights from secondary data sources to explore how social media is influencing youth involvement in societal transformation and the challenges that need to be addressed to ensure productive engagement.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the role of social media in shaping youth engagement in socio-political and cultural development.
2. To assess the contributions and limitations of social media use by youth in nation-building activities.
3. To examine secondary data and published studies to understand trends in youth digital behaviour.
4. To propose academic recommendations to optimise youth participation through digital media.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a strong emphasis on secondary data analysis to investigate the role of social media in youth engagement and nation-building. The methodology involves a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing literature, institutional reports, Government documents, and media sources that provide insights into the patterns, impacts, and implications of social media use among youth in India.

1. Data Sources

To ensure credibility and relevance, data was collected from a diverse range of authoritative and updated sources, including:

- **Institutional and Industry Reports:** Publications by reputable organisations such as the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), Pew Research Centre, and UNICEF, which offer statistical insights and behavioural trends related to youth and social media usage.
- **Academic Journals:** Peer-reviewed articles from national and international journals in the fields of sociology, communication studies, youth development, and digital culture were examined to understand theoretical perspectives and empirical findings.
- **Government Publications:** Official documents and reports from ministries and departments such as the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Digital India, and National Youth Policy, which outline policy directions, youth initiatives, and digital outreach programs.
- **Media Articles and Case Studies:** News coverage, opinion pieces, and documentation of youth-led social media movements and campaigns in India, such as climate change advocacy, gender rights, and political mobilizations, were studied to identify real-world implications.

2. Data Analysis

The collected secondary data was subjected to qualitative content analysis, enabling the researcher to identify recurring themes, patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the digital engagement of youth. Key data points were categorised under thematic areas such as youth participation, activism, digital literacy, misinformation, and policy support.

To ensure the reliability of findings, triangulation was used by comparing insights across multiple data sources and verifying them against existing scholarly frameworks and theoretical models. The analytical approach was interpretative, focusing on drawing meaningful inferences about youth behaviour, motivations, and their contribution to nation-building through digital platforms.

Results and Discussion

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature and secondary data on how Indian youth engage with social media and its implications for civic participation and nation-building. The discussion is structured around four key thematic areas: usage trends, civic engagement, opportunities for nation building, and emerging challenges.

1. Trends in Social Media Usage Among Indian Youth to explore the role of social media in shaping youth engagement in socio-political and cultural development

The penetration of digital technologies in India has significantly reshaped the communication patterns and lifestyle of young people. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023), over 500 million Indians actively use social media, and a substantial proportion of these users fall within the 15–34 age group. This indicates a massive youth presence in the digital sphere.

Among the most widely used platforms, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp dominate youth preferences due to their visual appeal, ease of use, and interactivity. A growing number of young users are not only passive consumers but also active content creators, with many establishing their own pages, vlogs, or micro-influencer identities. This shift reflects the democratisation of content creation and access to public discourse.

A study conducted by UNESCO (2022) reveals that 42% of Indian youth believe that social media platforms provide a more open space for self-expression, particularly concerning socio-political and cultural issues. This supports the idea that digital spaces have become extensions of personal and civic identity for young individuals.

Secondary data reveals that social media has become a central platform for youth expression on political, social, and cultural issues. Campaigns like #FridaysForFuture and #SwatchhBharat demonstrate how young users mobilise digital spaces for activism and cultural discourse.

2. Social media as a Tool for Civic Engagement to understand trends in youth digital behaviour.

Social media has emerged as a powerful instrument for civic mobilisation and youth-led activism in India. Digital platforms provide instantaneous reach and low-cost communication tools, enabling widespread organisation and participation in civic initiatives. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) have played a pivotal role in facilitating movements like #FarmersProtest, #JusticeForManisha, and #FridaysForFutureIndia, allowing youth to raise their voices against injustice, environmental degradation, and political apathy.

Content formats like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts have made it easier for young educators, reformers, and social workers to engage with larger audiences through visually appealing and informative content. These formats help simplify complex topics—such as electoral reforms, constitutional rights, and mental health—making them accessible and engaging for the general public.

Campaigns related to voter awareness, gender equality, sustainable development, and mental health advocacy are increasingly driven by young digital creators, NGOs, and college collectives. The viral nature of such initiatives highlights the speed and scale at which social media can influence public opinion and drive societal change.

3. Opportunities in Nation Building - contributions and limitations of social media use by youth in nation-building activities.

The youth-led initiatives on social platforms have promoted awareness, entrepreneurship, and civic participation, the spread of misinformation, online abuse, and digital addiction poses significant challenges that hinder constructive nation-building efforts.

The digital ecosystem presents a unique opportunity for inclusive youth participation in the nation-building process. Social media serves as a democratic and decentralised platform, offering even marginalised and rural youth the ability to connect, learn, and contribute to societal debates.

Youth-led pages and channels are thriving across various domains such as:

- **Education and Skill Development:** Sharing tutorials, job preparation content, and career guidance.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Promoting self-employment ventures, start-up ideas, and crowdfunding initiatives.
- **Civic Awareness:** Educating peers about constitutional rights, public policy, and governance systems.

The Indian Government has acknowledged this potential by incorporating social media into citizen engagement strategies. Initiatives such as Digital India, MyGov, and Youth for Nation actively invite ideas, feedback, and participation from youth through online platforms. These efforts signal a progressive shift toward e-governance and participatory democracy.

Furthermore, youth influencers and digital volunteers are increasingly collaborating with Governmental and non-Governmental organisations to amplify development messages, combat social evils, and enhance digital inclusion.

4. Challenges Identified in Literature to assess the contributions and limitations of social media use by youth in nation-building activities

While youth-led initiatives on social platforms have promoted awareness, entrepreneurship, and civic participation, the spread of misinformation, online abuse, and digital addiction poses significant challenges that hinder constructive nation-building efforts.

Despite its many benefits, the use of social media by youth is not without drawbacks. One of the most pressing issues is the prevalence of misinformation and fake news. The Observer Research Foundation (2022) notes that over 60% of Indian youth have difficulty distinguishing credible information from fabricated content, especially during high-stakes events like elections or social unrest.

Online harassment, cyberbullying, and trolling pose another serious concern, particularly for young women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other vulnerable groups. The anonymity and unregulated nature of some platforms often embolden users to engage in harmful or abusive behaviour.

Additionally, the overuse of social media has been linked to various mental health issues. As reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023), excessive screen time can contribute to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and attention problems. It also affects academic performance and interpersonal relationships, creating long-term developmental challenges.

The creation of algorithmic echo chambers, where users are exposed only to content that aligns with their beliefs, further limits healthy discourse and critical thinking. This phenomenon can intensify ideological polarisation and reduce openness to diverse viewpoints.

From the literature, it is also found that people in rural areas are less aware of the digital initiatives taken by the Government.

In summary, while social media provides an unprecedented platform for youth participation and empowerment, there is a critical need for digital literacy, policy regulation, and psychosocial support systems to ensure that these platforms are used constructively for the benefit of society and the nation.

CONCLUSION

In the context of a rapidly digitising society, social media has emerged as a transformative force in shaping the engagement, identity, and participation of young people in public life. For the youth of India—the world's largest youth population these platforms offer unparalleled opportunities to voice opinions, mobilise support, share knowledge, and influence societal change. From grassroots activism to entrepreneurial innovation, youth are leveraging digital spaces to contribute meaningfully to the nation-building process.

However, this potential is accompanied by complex challenges, including misinformation, cyberbullying, digital addiction, and the reinforcement of ideological silos. These risks highlight the need for a more nuanced and responsible approach to digital engagement. Social media, while powerful, is not inherently constructive;

its impact depends on how it is used, who controls the narratives, and the capacity of users to critically engage with content.

To truly harness the power of social media for nation-building, it is essential to empower youth with digital literacy, media ethics, and civic awareness. Equally important is the collaborative role of Governments, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and technology platforms in creating a safe, inclusive, and enabling digital environment.

Thus, the way forward lies in transforming social media from a space of distraction and division into one of dialogue, empowerment, and collective progress, ensuring that India's youth are not just digital consumers but active digital citizens contributing to a resilient and equitable nation.

Recommendations

To optimise the positive impact of social media on youth engagement and nation-building, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Embed Digital Media Literacy in Education:** Incorporate comprehensive digital literacy programs into school and higher education curricula to equip students with critical thinking skills, ethical online behaviour, and the ability to identify misinformation. This will foster the development of informed, responsible, and reflective digital citizens.
- 2. Support Youth-Led Digital Initiatives:** Establish Government-sponsored funding schemes and collaborative partnerships with NGOs, universities, and tech platforms to encourage youth-driven digital campaigns. These initiatives can focus on social justice, environmental sustainability, civic participation, and entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas.
- 3. Develop Transparent and Balanced Content Regulation Policies:** Implement clear and balanced social media regulations that safeguard users from harmful content including hate speech, fake news, and cyberbullying while upholding democratic values such as freedom of expression. Involve youth representatives in shaping these policies to ensure inclusivity.
- 4. Promote Digital Well-being and Mental Health:** Launch awareness campaigns and school-based interventions focused on the mental health risks of excessive screen time, social comparison, and online harassment. Encourage platforms to integrate well-being tools such as screen-time trackers, content filters, and mental health resources.
- 5. Create Mechanisms for Digital Civic Participation:** Develop structured platforms such as virtual youth parliaments, digital town halls, and participatory governance apps that allow young people to contribute ideas, give feedback on policies, and participate in decision-making processes at local and national levels.

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