Social Media and Political Participation Among the Students in India: A Survey Analysis

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Abstract

Keywords

Political
Participation,
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Social media,
Students,
Facebook,
Twitter,
WhatsApp and
YouTube

This paper investigates how Indian students participate in politics on social media. This study also investigates whether or not social media promotes offline political participation and political awareness among students in India. An online survey of 153 students was conducted. Students were selected purposively across different universities in India. The survey findings indicate that the majority of the students utilize social media for news updates and entertainment. This study further reveals that the majority of the students also read political content on Facebook, but they do not share or express their political views on social media. Similarly, most students do not follow politicians or join any groups related to politics on social media. The study reveals that social media has not yet evolved into a space for political discussion among students in India. Further, the study finds that the most of the students agree that social networking sites promote real-life participation and political awareness among the students in India.

Introduction

Information and communication technology changed the world a decade ago. A new media and technological revolution have altered social and political discourse, interpersonal contact, and communication patterns. Hundreds of studies have been conducted on social media use by researchers in the fields of communication and politics, sociology, and international relation. The Internet and social media are crucial in informing the public about current events, engaging users, and motivating them to participate in real political activities. Social media has become indispensable for political discourse and engagement. Political parties initially used traditional media as a one-way communication tool to inform the public. However, the emergence of new media communication technologies has democratised communication (Emruli, S, Baca, 2011). Majority of the youth have been found to be active users of different social media platforms. Youth are encouraged to participate in political events through several social networks

(Quintelier & Vissers, 2007). The use of social media, political literacy, and involvement in the political process are all linked. A vital part of this trend is influencing elections in developing states like Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka and Pakistan. The importance of social media platforms in distributing news and information has accelerated in recent years.(McAllister, 2016). However, social media can also undermine democracy if it is used to manipulate voters' behaviour. The US presidential elections of 2016 and other European elections have shown how social media threatens democracies. Social media has become the necessity in recent times as million of users turn to it for information and it also has the capacity to propagate misinformation and alter public perception. Social media has the potential to stimulate and enhance offline political engagement, demonstrating the Internet's twofold influence on political information and participation in politics (Nam 2012).

In India, the digital population has been increasing for a decade. Keelery (2021) reports that in 2020, there were over 749 million internet users in India, which is expected to grow further to over 1.5 billion users by 2040. In 2019 India was the second-largest internet market only after China. The ease of internet access increased India's number of social media users to 518 million in 2020. It has been estimated that by 2040, social network users will number nearly 1.5 billion throughout the country (Keelery, 2021a). The huge population of social media users in India is also encouraging politicians to connect with the youth through these platforms. Indian youth spend a considerable amount of time on social media for various reasons such as entertainment, making friends and news updates. Instagram is the most famous social network used and liked among Indian youngsters. During elections the main purpose of the tech-savvy politicians is always to influence the first-time voters, mainly youth. The cases of 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections are relevant when politicians like Modi skillfully exploited social media for connecting and enticing the youth.

Literature Review

Studies in this area have demonstrated the significance of social media in facilitating political participation and influencing political efficacy (Bimber and Copeland 2013). It has been found that social media users are more likely to participate in politics and political discussions than other non-users. It has been investigated how the Internet affects both online and real-life political participation. Jiang (2016) found that social media can foster political efficacy, participation and individual's opinion of politics. Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen (2013) in their research revealed that new media has provided platforms for people to information, interaction and participation in politics. In the context of India, the significance of social media was first highlighted in the movement 'India Against Corruption' spearheaded by Anna Hazare (Kattakayam, 2011). Social media platforms were further used for facilitating social movements such as #MeToo, Nirbhaya, LGBTQ, Pink Chaddi campaign, and Stop Acid Sale (Chamikutty, 2009; Dimri & Parag, 2018). When it comes to the elections of India, social media cannot be ignored. The Lok Sabha elections of 2014 were dubbed the 'first social media elections' in India due to their unprecedented use by politicians and the public. Political parties in India use social media during elections to influence voters' behaviour. These platforms are generally being used for conducting election campaigning. In India, however, social media has less influence on election outcomes (Kanungo 2015). A study showed that social media users were more likely to participate in offline politics than non-users (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies 2019). Lokniti CSDS (2019) also revealed that social media platforms were not generally used for conducting political discussions. Social media has also acted as a threat to Indian democracy as the platform has been used for spreading propaganda and misinformation (Anuradha, 2019). The study on Indian educated youths' political involvement through social media has received less attention.

This study attempts to know about the political engagement of Indian educated youths through social media.

Methodology

The population for this study includes college and university students across India. The students include undergraduates, postgraduates, and even PhD scholars. In order to obtain better results, a quantitative survey method has been utilised. For the collection of the data, a Google form questionnaire was created and shared with 153 students through WhatsApp and Facebook. The students were selected purposively to get the desired results. The responses were collected for six months (July to December 2021). In this study, closed-ended questionnaires were constructed, and respondents could choose one answer to each question. In this study, the use of social media is taken as an independent variable, and offline political participation and political awareness are taken as dependent variables.

Research Questions

How do students use social media to engage in politics?
How social media promotes offline political participation among students in India?
Whether or not social media creates political awareness among students in India?

Findings

In order to find the answers to *RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3,* participants were asked several questions regarding their social media activities. The following questions were asked to participants, and their responses were recorded in Google Forms.

Which of the following social media do you use?

Most of the respondents used all five social media platforms. Among all these social media platforms, WhatsApp was used by 58.8% of students, followed by YouTube 49.7%, Facebook 44.4%, Instagram 28.8% and Twitter 20.3%.

Which of the following social media do you use?.
153 responses
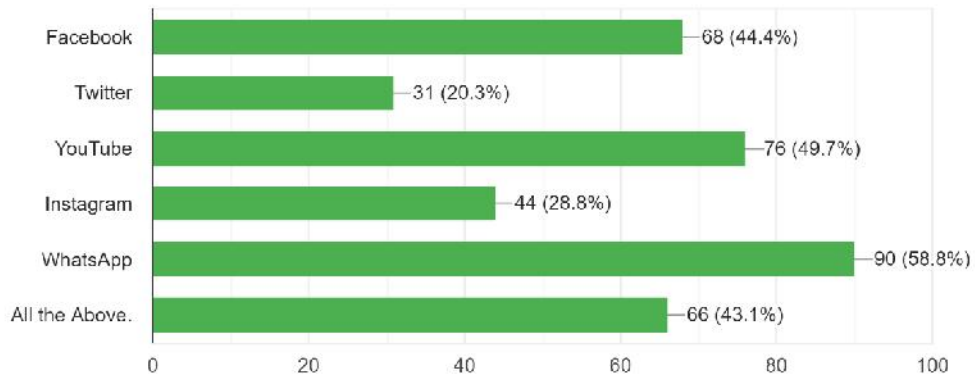
For what purpose do you use social media?

Most of the respondents use social media for different activities from entertainment to making friends. However, 47.1% of respondents use social media for news purposes, and only 6.5% use social media for making friends. It shows that social media is the most popular means of getting news updates among Indian students.

For What purpose do you use social media?.
153 responses
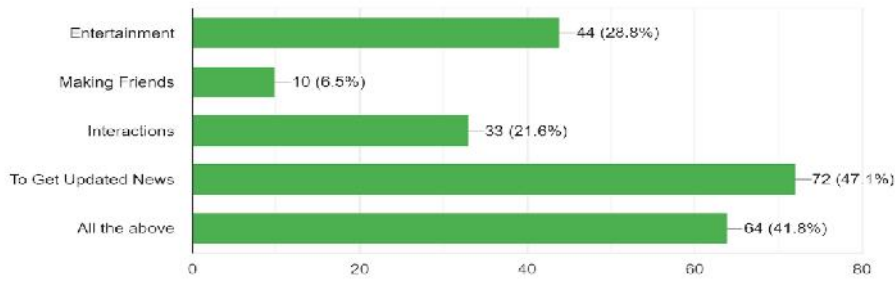
Do you read political news on social media?

Most of the respondents (49%) read news related to politics daily, followed by 34% who sometimes read political news. Furthermore, only 11.8% of respondents said they rarely read political content on social media. This demonstrated that most students read political content on social media in India.

Do you read political news on social media?.
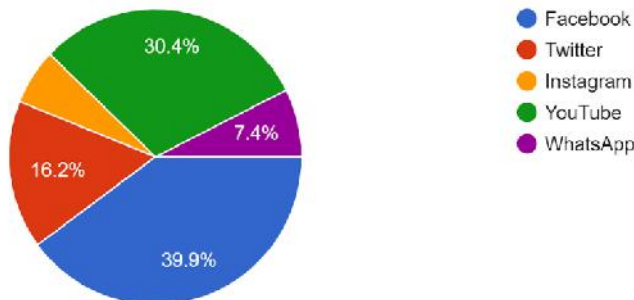153 responses
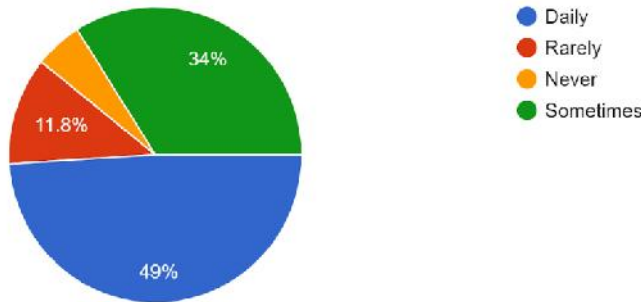
Which social media platform do you use mostly for getting news related to politics?

Most of the respondents said that they mostly use Facebook (39.9) for getting news related to politics, followed by YouTube (30.4%), Twitter (16.2) and WhatsApp (7.4%).

Which social media platform do you use mostly for getting news related to politics?.
148 responses

Do you follow any politician or political party on social media?

60.1% responded that they do not follow any politician or political party on any social media

platform, while 39.9% responded that they follow politicians on social media.

Do you follow any Indian Politician or Political Party on Social Media?
153 responses
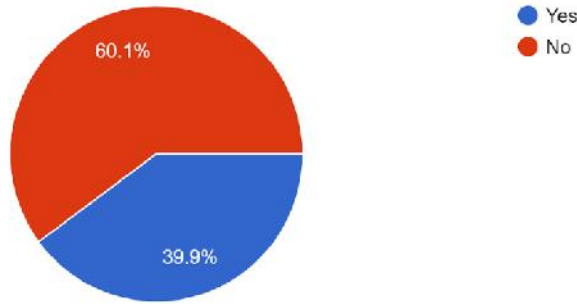
Are you a member of any Facebook or WhatsApp group related to politics?

One hundred thirteen respondents (73.9%) responded that they are not a part of any

Facebook or WhatsApp group related to politics, while 40 respondents (26.1%) responded that they are a part of Facebook and WhatsApp groups related to politics.

Are you the member of any Facebook or WhatsApp group related to politics?.
153 responses
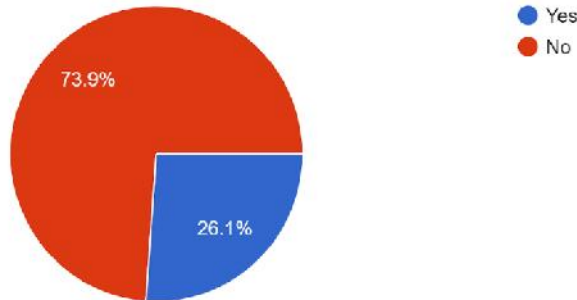
Do you express your personal views related to politics on social media?

Most of the respondents 64, (41.8%), responded that they do not express their personal views on

politics on social media. A total of 35 individuals (22.9%) replied that they occasionally discuss politics on social media. The respondents who stated that they expressed their political views on social media daily was just 15(9.8%).

Do you express your personal views related to politics on social media?.
153 responses

- Daily
- Rarely
- Mostly
- Never
- Sometimes
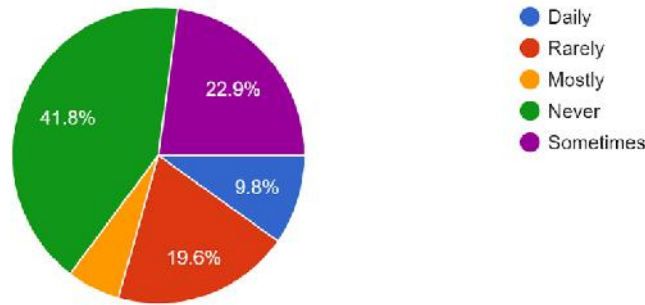
On which social media platform do you express your personal views related to politics quite often?

Most of the respondents 65(47.4) responded that they use Facebook for expressing their political views, followed by WhatsApp 40(29.2), Twitter 20(14.6%), YouTube 11(8%) and Instagram 7(5.1%).

On which social media site do you express your personal views related to politics quite often?.
137 responses

| Platform	Count
Facebook	65 (47.4%)
Twitter	20 (14.6%)
Instagram	7 (5.1%)
YouTube	11 (8%)
WhatsApp	40 (29.2%)
All the above.	15 (10.9%)
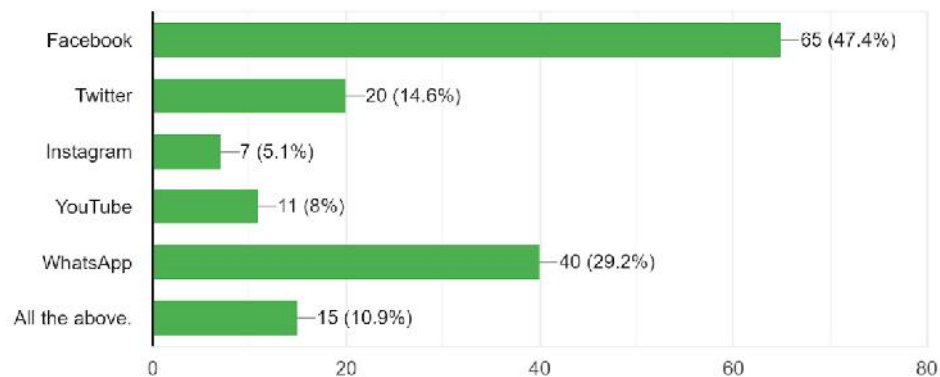
Do you share political content on social media?

The majority of the respondents 51(33.3%) responded that they do not share any political content on any social media platform. While 34(22.2%) responded that they sometimes share political content on social media, and only 17(11.1%) mostly share political content on social media. Most respondents responded that they share political content mainly via Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and less on Instagram and YouTube.

Do you share political content on social media?.
153 responses

Legend:
- Daily
- Rarely
- Mostly
- Never
- Sometimes

(Pie chart values: 33.3%, 22.2%, 26.8%, 11.1%)
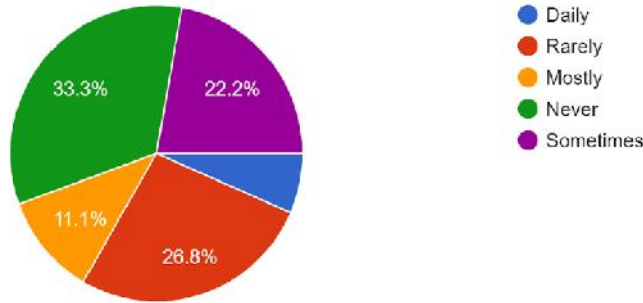
Do you sign or collect signatures for an online petition?
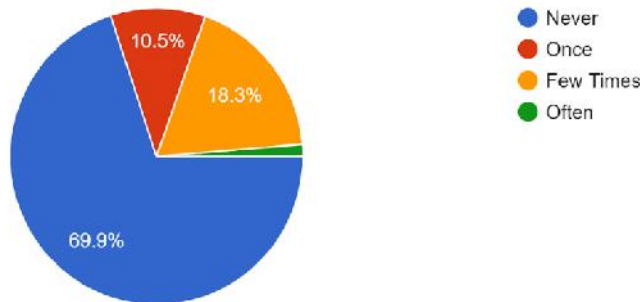
The majority of the respondents 88(55.6%) responded that they never signed or collected an online petition. Meanwhile, 18 (11.8%) respondents reported doing so at least once. The 44 respondents (28.8%) stated they had done this only a few times. Only six respondents (3.9%) stated they were doing it daily.

Do you donate or raise money for social/political purposes online?

The majority of the respondents 107(69.9%) responded that they do not raise or donate money online. Among the respondents, 28 (18.3) said they had donated money just a few times. A mere 16(18.3) of respondents said they have donated only once.

Do/Did you donate or raise money for social/political purpose online?.
153 responses

Legend:
- Never
- Once
- Few Times
- Often

(Pie chart values: 69.9%, 10.5%, 18.3%)

Does social media create political awareness among its users?

The majority of respondents, 83(54.2), agreed that social media raises political awareness among its

users. 15 respondents (9.8%) strongly believe that social media raises political awareness. While 31(20.3%) respondents stayed indifferent, 13(8.5%) disagreed, and 11(7.2%) strongly disagreed.

Does social media create political awareness among its users?.
153 responses
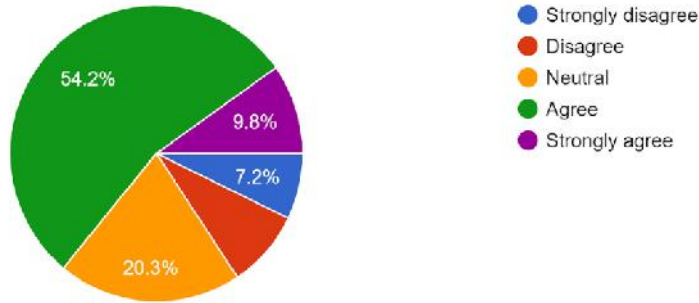
Does social media motivate you to go for offline political participation (like attending election rallies, voting, political campaigning, distributing pamphlets)?

Forty-three respondents (28.1%) remained neutral, while 42(27.5%) agreed that social media

promotes offline political participation and 12(7.8%) participants strongly agreed on the same. Among 153 respondents, 37(24.2%) do not agree that social media encourages offline political participation, and 19 participants (12.4&) strongly disagree with this idea.

Does social media motivate you to go for an offline political participation (like attending election rallies, voting, political campaigning, distributing pamphlets)?.
153 responses
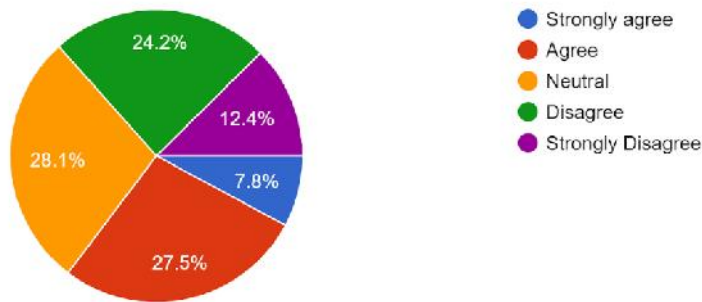
Does social media bring its users closer to politics?

In the survey, 77(50.3%) participants responded that they believed social media brought them

closer to politics, and 18(11.8%) respondents strongly agreed with this statement. Thirty-two respondents (20.9%) remained neutral, while 8 (5.2%) respondents disagreed that social media allows users to become more politically engaged.

17

Does social media bring its users closer to politics?.
153 responses
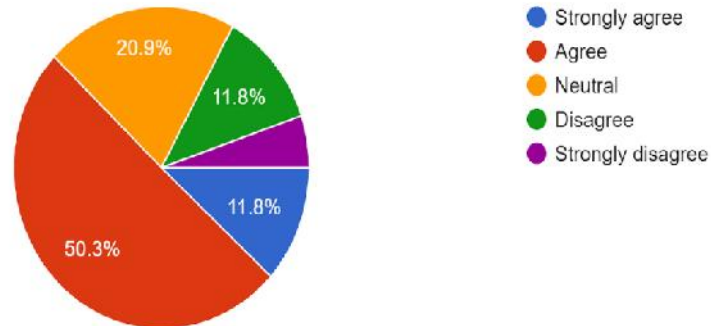
Discussion

This study demonstrated that students in India have mainly used WhatsApp and YouTube. Traditionally, social media platforms have been widely used for entertainment and making friends; however, this trend seems to be changing among the educated millennials in India. The majority of the respondents (47.1%) in the survey agreed that they only use social media for news purposes, and only (6.5%) still use it for making friends. However, a considerable portion of the population (28.8%) uses social media for entertainment purposes. It indicates that students in India use social media primarily for two purposes: obtaining news updates and entertaining themselves. The majority of the students read political content on Facebook rather than on WhatsApp which they mostly use. The survey results showed that Twitter is the third choice of students for reading politically oriented content after Facebook and YouTube.

The culture of following politicians on social media is less among students. The majority of the users (60.1%) do not follow politicians on social media; only (39.9%) users have been found to follow politicians on social media. Most students (73.9%) do not want to participate in any political Facebook or WhatsApp group. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they sidestep these groups,

more than 1/4th (26.1%) of students are members of Facebook and WhatsApp groups related to politics. It was found in this study that the majority of the respondents read political content on social media, however, very few express or share their personal opinions on politics. There have been just 9.8% of users who express their political views on social media daily. It shows that social media is not yet widely recognised as a place for political conversation and it is not yet common for students to discuss politics on these platforms. Lokniti-CSDS (2019) in its study had also revealed that the majority of the users do not discuss politics on social media. When it comes to sharing political content, most of the users (33.3%) do not share political content on social media, and only (11.1%) do so. There may be several reasons why users do not share political content on social media, but this study does not answer those questions. This study also revealed that the majority of the users do not sign online petitions or raise money for political purposes. As this study indicated that the majority of the students use social media for news updates and reading content specific to politics, this implies that social media could potentially raise political awareness. The majority of the students (54.2%) believe that social media creates political

awareness among its users and brings them closer to politics. This study also found that over 1/3rd of students (35.3%) agreed that social media encourages them for real life participation such as in voting, election rallies, door-to-door campaigning. This study replicates the prior research of Lokniti-CSDS (2019), which also found that social media is a positive predictor for encouraging offline political participation in India. Indian politicians must enhance their communication tactics in order to fully use social media's enormous potential for social and political objectives. They should devise strategies for engaging educated youth in social and political conversations on social media.

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