Youth Participation in the Digital Public Sphere: Social Media, Political Expression and Civic Engagement among Indian Youth

Deepak Kem

Professor, Dr KRN Center for Dalit and Minorities Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have become part of the everyday environment in which young people encounter public issues, form opinions, communicate with others and participate in civic life. This paper examines how social-media use relates to political information, political expression and civic engagement among Indian youth, both online and offline. It draws on a previously reported quantitative study of 150 respondents and re-examines the available evidence as a secondary analysis rather than presenting a new survey. The analysis brings together patterns of social-media use, political-information consumption, political expression and civic participation within the broader idea of the digital public sphere. The findings suggest that social media serves more than an informational function. For many respondents it is also a place to discuss political issues, express opinions, circulate content and participate in civic activities. Political-information use and political expression appear closely connected, as do political-information use and online civic participation. More frequent social-media use is also associated with greater political expression, while social-media use shows a positive relationship with political participation. At the same time, online civic engagement does not necessarily translate into corresponding offline participation. The paper therefore treats youth participation as a varied and overlapping set of practices rather than as a simple movement from the physical world to the digital one. It also considers the quality of the digital public sphere, particularly the challenges posed by misinformation, selective exposure, polarisation and unequal participation.

Keywords: Digital public sphere; Indian youth; social media; political expression; civic engagement; digital participation; political communication

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has changed the everyday experience of public life. People now encounter political information, debate social issues, respond to public events and organise collective action through networked platforms that are woven into ordinary communication. The digital public sphere is therefore not simply a newer version of traditional media. It is a changing environment in which information circulates quickly, users respond to one another and public questions can be discussed, reframed and contested. Cohen and Fung (2021) emphasise the democratic possibilities of such communication, while also drawing attention to the conditions required for meaningful public participation. Platforms can make communication easier and more immediate, but their design and governance also influence what becomes visible, how conversations unfold and whose voices receive attention.

These changes are especially significant for young people. Research suggests that the political use of digital media can be related to civic and political participation, although the nature of that relationship depends greatly on what young people actually do online (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). A young person may follow a political issue, share a news item, join a campaign, comment on a public controversy, take part in a discussion or simply observe a conversation. These activities may require very different levels of commitment, yet together they have broadened the meaning of political participation. The networked young citizen described by Loader et al. (2014) and the patterns identified by Xenos et al. (2014) point towards forms of engagement that are more personalised, informal and digitally mediated than many traditional models of participation.

The Indian context adds an important dimension to this discussion. Research on Indian youth has linked new-media use with expressive and emotional interaction as well as civic involvement (Pathak, 2018). Other work has considered the role of media in political activism, awareness and youth empowerment (Bansal & Shreelakshmi, 2024). Rodrigues (2014) similarly describes an Indian public sphere in which media, interpersonal communication and social platforms increasingly overlap. Political information and political conversation can therefore take place within the same digital environment, making the boundary between receiving information and participating in public discussion less distinct.

Yet greater connectivity does not automatically mean a healthier or more inclusive public sphere. Digital users can encounter misinformation, selective exposure, ideologically similar networks and polarised discussion. Barberá (2020) highlights the importance of ideological segregation and selective exposure in understanding social-media polarisation, while Angelova (2025) examines echo chambers and their relationship with polarised communication. These concerns are particularly relevant to young people because the democratic value of digital participation depends not only on whether people are connected, but also on the quality and diversity of the information and viewpoints they encounter.

Against this background, the present paper revisits previously reported quantitative evidence on youth participation in the digital public sphere. It does not claim to have generated a new dataset. Instead, it reorganises and interprets the existing evidence around four closely connected concerns: social-media use, political information, political expression and civic participation. The purpose is to understand how these dimensions fit together within the wider discussion of digital public-sphere participation in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Digital Public Sphere and Youth Political Participation

The digital public sphere can be understood as a collection of networked spaces where people encounter public information, exchange views and articulate shared concerns. Cohen and Fung (2021) connect democratic communication with citizens' ability to access information, communicate with others and discuss matters of common concern. In digital environments, however, communication is shaped not only by users but also by the architecture and governance of platforms. Badel and Baeza (2021) and Rodrigues (2014) draw attention to the growing importance of digital spaces in contemporary public communication, while Chanchaipitiphat et al. (2025) suggest that online public spheres are better understood as overlapping and plural rather than as one common arena.

Research on social media and political participation has increasingly moved away from the simple question of whether digital media is good or bad for democracy. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) associated social-media news use with social capital, civic engagement and political participation, while Effing et al. (2011) explored the possibilities created by social networking sites for political involvement. Boulianne and Theocharis (2020), in a meta-analysis of 106 survey-based studies and 965 coefficients, found particularly clear positive relationships for directly political forms of digital use, such as online news consumption and political discussion. They also caution that the direction of the relationship cannot simply be assumed: political interest may encourage digital political activity just as digital activity may be associated with greater political engagement. This caution is important for interpreting the evidence used in the present paper.

For young people, participation is rarely confined to a single type of activity. Political expression may involve stating an opinion, commenting on a post, sharing information or entering a discussion. Weinstein (2014) shows how social media can create channels for civic expression among already engaged young people, while Catalina-García et al. (2019) identify the relevance of social-network use to social and political engagement among university students. At the same time, online participation can range from relatively simple acts of sharing and commenting to more organised involvement in campaigns and collective causes (Middaugh et al., 2024). Apata et al. (2026) and Vetrivel et al. (2026) place these practices within broader discussions of youth civic engagement and digital citizenship. The distinction matters because visible online expression should not automatically be treated as evidence of sustained civic or organizational involvement.

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Digital Citizenship, Media Literacy and the Quality of Participation

The idea of digital citizenship shifts attention from access alone to the way people participate online.

Responsible digital participation requires users to make sense of information, assess credibility, recognise misleading material and engage with others without losing sight of civic responsibility. Rajavel (2026) and Vetrivel et al. (2026) connect digital citizenship with civic responsibility, while Hira (2026) and Tamuli (2026) emphasise media literacy in relation to digital activism. Nchaga (2025) similarly points to both the opportunities and difficulties that accompany civic engagement in a digital environment. For political participation, this means that the frequency of online activity tells only part of the story. The quality of engagement and the information environment surrounding it are equally important.

This becomes especially important in discussions of misinformation, polarisation and echo chambers. Barberá (2020) examines selective exposure and ideological segregation, while Angelova (2025) discusses echo chambers in relation to wider social polarisation. Husnain et al. (2026) and Baneen et al. (2025) also consider misinformation, political polarisation and youth tolerance in digital environments. These studies do not establish that the respondents in the present sample personally experienced echo chambers or misinformation. Rather, they provide a useful context for thinking about the democratic consequences of digital participation. A person may be highly active online and still encounter a narrow range of viewpoints. For this reason, the quality of communication matters alongside the amount of communication.

Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial evidence on social-media use, political information, political expression and civic participation, but these dimensions are often examined separately. Some studies focus primarily on information consumption and political expression, while others distinguish between online and offline participation. The present paper brings these strands together through a secondary analysis of a reported sample of 150 young respondents. It places the empirical patterns within the wider conceptual discussion of the digital public sphere, digital citizenship, media literacy and the risks associated with misinformation and polarised communication. The focus is therefore not simply on how much young people use social media, but on what that use means for their relationship with political information, public expression and civic life.

Objectives

a) To examine how social-media use relates to political expression among young people in India, using evidence from the earlier empirical study.
b) To understand the relationship between young people's social-media engagement and their civic participation.
c) To examine the reported associations between patterns of social-media use and different forms of political and civic engagement.
d) To interpret the role of digital platforms in young people's participation in the Indian public sphere.
e) To consider wider challenges surrounding digital political and civic participation, particularly misinformation, polarisation and unequal opportunities for participation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Source

The study uses a secondary quantitative design. The evidence comes from an earlier quantitative study that reported respondent characteristics, frequencies, percentages and inferential results. No new survey, interview or fieldwork was undertaken for the present paper. Its contribution lies in bringing the available evidence into a coherent analytical framework centred on participation in the digital public sphere.

The analysis covers 150 respondents. The reported variables include demographic characteristics, patterns of social-media use, political-information seeking, political expression, online civic participation and offline civic

participation. The original numerical values are retained so that the discussion remains faithful to the evidence from which it is drawn.

Approach to Data Analysis

The evidence is considered at both descriptive and inferential levels. Descriptive information is used to show who the respondents were and how frequently particular forms of digital and civic activity were reported. The source study also reported chi-square tests, Pearson's correlation and regression results. These are retained as reported rather than recalculated. Because the evidence is cross-sectional and secondary, the relationships are interpreted cautiously. They indicate patterns within the reported sample; they should not be read as proof that one form of activity directly causes another.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results below retain the numerical information reported in the source study but present it in narrative form rather than through tables. This approach makes the patterns easier to read while keeping the empirical detail visible. The discussion also connects the figures to the broader question of how young people participate in a changing digital public sphere.

Respondent Profile and Social-Media Use

The sample consisted of 150 respondents. Young people aged 21–23 formed the largest group, with 51 respondents (34.0%). They were followed by those aged 18–20, who accounted for 42 respondents (28.0%), those aged 24–26 with 35 respondents (23.3%), and those aged 27–29 with 22 respondents (14.7%). Overall, 128 respondents, or 85.3 per cent, were between 18 and 26 years of age. The sample included 82 males (54.7%) and 68 females (45.3%).

Social media was clearly part of the respondents' everyday communication environment. A total of 108 respondents (72.0%) reported using social media daily, while 30 (20.0%) used it several times a week. Only 12 respondents (8.0%) described their use as occasional. The amount of time spent online was also substantial: 15 respondents (10.0%) reported less than an hour a day, 57 (38.0%) reported one to three hours, 51 (34.0%) reported three to five hours, and 27 (18.0%) reported more than five hours. Taken together, these figures suggest a high level of routine exposure to social-media environments.

Political Information and Expression

Political information formed a visible part of this digital routine. Regular consumption of political information or news was reported by 108 respondents (72.0%), while 96 (64.0%) followed political or social issues through social media. Sixty respondents (60.0%) reported participating in political discussions, and 78 (52.0%) shared political information or content. The pattern suggests that social media was being used not simply as a place to receive political information, but also as a space in which that information could be discussed and circulated.

Political expression appeared in several forms. Online political discussions were reported by 90 respondents (60.0%). Expressing political opinions was reported by 84 respondents (56.0%), sharing political content by 78 (52.0%), and commenting on political posts by 75 (50.0%). These figures show that political participation in the sample was not confined to formal political activity. Conversation, commentary, opinion-sharing and circulation of content were all part of the respondents' digital political experience.

Online and Offline Civic Participation

Online civic engagement also took a variety of forms. Sharing civic or social-awareness information was the most frequently reported activity, involving 96 respondents (64.0%). Issue-based online discussions followed at 60.0%, reported by 90 respondents. Online awareness activities were reported by 87 respondents (58.0%), while 72 (48.0%) reported participation in online campaigns and 60 (40.0%) in online petitions. The pattern suggests that communication and awareness activities were more common than forms of participation that required a more organised or formal commitment.

Civic participation was not confined to the digital environment. Offline civic or community activities were reported by 81 respondents (54.0%), while 78 (52.0%) participated in community-awareness activities. Civic campaigns involved 69 respondents (46.0%), public meetings or programmes involved 63 (42.0%), and 54 (36.0%) reported other offline civic activities. The coexistence of online and offline activity is significant. The figures do not suggest that digital participation simply displaced conventional forms of civic engagement; rather, young people appear to move between several spaces of participation.

Connecting digital use with political and civic engagement

When the different parts of the evidence are considered together, a consistent picture emerges. Young people who were using social media to follow political information were also involved in political discussion and online civic activity. More frequent social-media use was similarly connected with political expression. The reported analysis also points to a positive relationship between social-media use and political participation, while political-information consumption emerged as an important predictor in the source study. At the same time, online and offline civic participation did not show a statistically significant relationship at the conventional 5 per cent level.

The most useful way to read these findings is not to assume that digital activity automatically produces political or civic engagement. Instead, the evidence suggests that different forms of participation can overlap. Social media can provide the information, conversation and visibility through which political engagement develops, but the direction of influence cannot be established from this cross-sectional secondary evidence. What the findings make clear is that young people's participation is spread across several connected spaces rather than located entirely online or entirely offline.

DISCUSSION

The results place social media firmly within the communication environment of the young respondents. Most participants used social platforms regularly, and political information was a visible part of that use. Yet frequency alone does not tell us much about political engagement. What matters is what people do with the time and access available to them. This observation is consistent with Boulianne and Theocharis (2020), who show that the relationship between digital-media use and civic or political engagement is closely tied to the purpose and form of use.

Political-information seeking is particularly revealing. A large share of the respondents regularly consumed political information or followed political and social issues online. This behaviour was accompanied by discussion, sharing and political expression. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) similarly found relationships between social-media news use and civic and political participation, while Kim (2023) stresses that the type of social-media use matters when political engagement is examined. The present findings fit within this broader understanding: social media becomes politically meaningful when users do more than simply encounter content and begin to discuss, interpret and circulate it.

Seen through the idea of the digital public sphere, this is an important shift. The respondents were not merely consumers of political news. They were also participants in communication around public issues. Cohen and Fung (2021) place communication, information exchange and discussion at the heart of democratic public life. The evidence here reflects those functions in everyday digital practices: discussion, opinion-sharing, commenting and circulation of political material. It also resonates with the idea of the networked young citizen developed by Loader et al. (2014), while Xenos et al. (2014) show that the way young people use social media is important to understanding their political involvement.

The pattern of online civic participation adds another layer. Sharing information and discussing issues were more common than campaigns and petitions. This difference matters because digital participation is not a single behaviour. Some activities require only a moment of attention or expression, while others demand organisation, coordination and sustained commitment. Middaugh et al. (2024) and Apata et al. (2026) therefore provide a

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useful way of thinking about youth participation as a spectrum of practices rather than a simple yes-or-no condition.

The relationship between online and offline civic activity also deserves attention. The evidence does not support the idea that online participation naturally flows into offline participation. Digital and physical civic activities can coexist without one necessarily leading to the other. This is consistent with a broader understanding of contemporary youth participation as multidimensional rather than as a straightforward transition from traditional civic life to digital activism.

The democratic significance of this participation depends, however, on the quality of the information environment. Social media can widen access to public discussion, but it can also expose users to selective information, misinformation, ideological segregation and polarised exchanges. Barberá (2020) and Angelova (2025) provide important context for understanding these risks, while Husnain et al. (2026) and Baneen et al. (2025) draw attention to misinformation, polarisation and tolerance in digital environments. These studies do not demonstrate that the present respondents experienced such conditions; rather, they help explain why participation should not be judged by volume alone.

This is where media literacy and digital citizenship become especially important. Hira (2026) and Tamuli (2026) emphasise media literacy in relation to digital activism, while Rajavel (2026) and Vetrivel et al. (2026) connect digital citizenship with civic responsibility. Meaningful participation involves the ability to assess information, recognise misleading claims, communicate responsibly and encounter viewpoints different from one's own. These dimensions were not directly measured in the present dataset, so they should be understood as interpretive implications rather than as empirical findings.

The Indian context makes these questions particularly relevant. Bansal and Shreelakshmi (2024) discuss media participation, political activism and youth empowerment in India, while Pathak (2018) examines the relationship between new media and civic involvement among Indian youth. Rodrigues (2014) situates these developments within the changing Indian public sphere. The present analysis contributes to this conversation by bringing political information, expression and civic participation into the same empirical account. The wider literature also reminds us that digital political participation is shaped by cultural context, including in South Asian societies (Hugay et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings point towards a public sphere that is increasingly dispersed across digital and physical settings. Young people encounter political information online, talk about it, express opinions and participate in civic activities, while continuing to engage in offline spaces. The important point is not that one form of participation has replaced another. Rather, youth civic life appears to be becoming more layered, with different forms of engagement overlapping and interacting in ways that are not always predictable.

KEY FINDINGS

The study presents a sample of 150 respondents, with the largest age group being 21–23 years (34.0%). Social-media use was widespread: 72.0 per cent reported daily use and another 20.0 per cent used social media several times a week. Political information was also prominent, with 72.0 per cent regularly consuming political information or news and 64.0 per cent following political or social issues through social media.

Political expression was varied. Sixty per cent reported participating in online political discussions, 56.0 per cent expressed political opinions, 52.0 per cent shared political content and 50.0 per cent commented on political posts. Online civic activity was similarly diverse, ranging from sharing civic or social-awareness information and discussing issues to taking part in campaigns and petitions. Offline participation remained visible as well, particularly through civic or community activities and community-awareness programmes.

The reported statistical analysis found meaningful connections among several of these activities. Political-information consumption was associated with political expression and online civic participation, while frequency of social-media use was associated with political expression. Social-media use also showed a positive relationship with political participation, and political-information consumption was identified as a significant

predictor in the reported regression analysis. By contrast, the relationship between online and offline civic participation did not reach the conventional level of statistical significance. Taken together, these findings portray youth participation as interconnected but not uniform.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become an important setting in which young people encounter political information, communicate their views and participate in civic life. The evidence examined in this paper shows that digital engagement is not limited to passive consumption. Young respondents used social platforms to follow public issues, discuss politics, express opinions, share information and participate in civic activities. Several of these forms of engagement were closely connected within the reported sample.

At the same time, the findings caution against treating digital participation as a simple replacement for conventional civic engagement. Online and offline activities can coexist without one necessarily producing the other. The more useful conclusion is that young people's civic lives now extend across several interconnected spaces. Social media creates additional opportunities for communication and participation, but the nature and meaning of that participation depend on what users encounter, how they interact and what they do beyond the platform.

The democratic value of the digital public sphere also depends on the quality of its information environment. Misinformation, selective exposure and polarisation can shape public communication, while media literacy and responsible digital citizenship can influence how users respond to what they encounter. These issues were not directly measured in the present dataset and therefore remain contextual considerations rather than findings about the respondents themselves.

The central contribution of the study is therefore to show that youth participation in the digital public sphere is best understood as a set of overlapping practices rather than a single form of online behaviour. Social media can connect young people with information, conversation and civic action, but its significance lies not simply in how often it is used. It lies in what young people do with the opportunities it creates and in how those digital experiences connect with the wider civic world.

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