

Media Literacy and Hashtag Activism in the Digital Public Sphere: A Critical Review of Civic Engagement in India

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Abstract:

In the contemporary digital age, civic engagement is increasingly mediated through social media platforms, where hashtag activism has emerged as a prominent form of participatory expression. While hashtags enable rapid dissemination of civic and political narratives, their effectiveness in fostering informed and meaningful democratic participation remains contested. This paper critically examines the relationship between media literacy and hashtag-based civic engagement in the Indian digital public sphere. Drawing exclusively secondary data, the study adopts a qualitative narrative review methodology, synthesizing existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional frameworks related to media literacy, digital citizenship, and participatory media. Key sources include peer-reviewed research articles, UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework, and published analyses of digital civic movements in India. Through thematic analysis, the paper identifies core dimensions of media literacy such as critical evaluation, ethical participation, and algorithmic awareness and analyses how these competencies shape citizens' engagement with hashtag activism. The findings suggest that while hashtag activism enhances visibility and symbolic participation, the absence of adequate media literacy often results in performative engagement, misinformation amplification, and fragmented civic discourse. The paper argues that media literacy functions as a democratic skill that can transform hashtag activism from mere digital expression into informed civic participation. By conceptually

linking media literacy competencies with civic engagement outcomes, the study contributes to ongoing debates on digital citizenship and democratic participation. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for integrating media literacy education into policy and pedagogical frameworks to strengthen informed civic engagement in India's evolving digital public sphere.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Hashtag Activism; Civic Engagement; Digital Public Sphere; Digital Citizenship; India

1. Introduction:

The landscape of civic engagement has been fundamentally reshaped by the rapid proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), transforming conventional modes of political participation into multidimensional practices of digital citizenship (Erdem et al., 2022; Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). This transformation is particularly pronounced in India, which has emerged as one of the largest social media markets globally, with over 500 million users actively participating in networked communication environments (Tuli & Danish, 2021; Yadav & Verma, 2025). As India transitions from a traditional broadcast-centric media system to a "many-to-many" conversational model, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have evolved from spaces of entertainment into critical arenas for political deliberation, civic expression, and activist networking (Jayachandran, 2018; Kumar & Thapa, 2014; Burke & Şen, 2018; Kalorth et al., 2020). This shift has been accelerated by the widespread availability of low-cost smartphones and affordable data plans, significantly expanding digital access across socioeconomic groups and fostering a more interactive, mediatized public sphere (Sarwatay et al., 2021). As a result, citizens are no longer passive consumers of information but increasingly function as co-producers of public discourse and agenda-setters (Jayachandran, 2018; Paul & Dowling, 2018). Within this evolving digital public sphere, historically marginalized communities have found new opportunities to challenge entrenched power structures, articulate lived

experiences, and contest dominant narratives (Paul & Dowling, 2018; Ram, 2024). Central to this transformation is the rise of hashtag activism, a form of digitally mediated collective action that employs “activist hashtags” as metadata tools to coordinate protests, disseminate testimonies, and articulate justice-oriented claims (Tuli & Danish, 2021). In the Indian context, movements such as the 2011 anti-corruption protests led by Anna Hazare, #MeTooIndia, #DalitLivesMatter following the Hathras incident, #FarmersProtest, and #CAAProtests demonstrate the capacity of hashtag activism to facilitate decentralized mobilization and amplify dissent both nationally and globally (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Roy et al., 2021; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023; Ram, 2024). These movements illustrate how digital platforms can bypass traditional media gatekeepers and enable the formation of “hashtag publics” alternative counter-public spheres that foreground voices often excluded from mainstream discourse (Thakur, 2019; Jain, 2020; Edwards et al., 2021).

Hashtag activism further enables the creation of symbolic and affective solidarities through shared linguistic cues, visual markers, and narrative frames, fostering “imagined communities” that can challenge dominant cultural and political ideologies (Liu et al., 2022; Holze & Zitzelsbergera, 2022). Initiatives such as Dalit Camera exemplify how digital archives and citizen journalism practices leverage hashtag networks to document histories of oppression and report ongoing discrimination, thereby contributing directly to social movements for equality and justice (Paul & Dowling, 2018). However, while these digital movements possess significant agenda-setting potential, their democratic efficacy is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. The effectiveness of digital civic participation is deeply contingent upon media literacy, understood as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, reflect upon, and produce media messages with civic intentionality (Chu, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Mihailidis et al., 2021). In an era characterized by information overload, algorithmic governance, and post-truth politics, media literacy has emerged as a critical safeguard for democratic

engagement, enabling citizens to identify misinformation, recognize bias, and critically assess the credibility of digital content (Yue et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Yadav & Verma, 2025). Research suggests that while traditional political knowledge remains important, it is insufficient in isolation; meaningful participation in contentious digital spaces requires advanced critical thinking skills and reflexive media competencies (Lee et al., 2021; Mihailidis et al., 2021).

Empirical studies indicate that mastery of media literacy dimensions particularly access, analysis, reflection, and action significantly predict the quality and integrity of political participation, especially among youth populations (Hassan et al., 2022). Media literacy thus functions not merely as a technical skill but as a social practice and democratic capacity, equipping citizens to move from passive engagement to active problem identification and civic solution-building (Sharma et al., 2022; Mihailidis et al., 2021; Boivin & Johnson, 2024). Despite the high visibility of hashtag activism in India, a substantial research gap persists in critically synthesizing media literacy and digital activism within the country's specific sociocultural context. Much of the existing scholarship remains Western-centric, inadequately accounting for how media literacy and digital participation are shaped by non-Western, highly stratified societies (Erdem et al., 2022; McDougall & Rega, 2022; Mihailidis et al., 2021). In India, the digital divide driven by intersecting inequalities of income, education, geography, and caste operates as a fourth layer of structural marginalization, often silencing rural and low-income voices even within ostensibly inclusive digital campaigns (Relly & Pakanati, 2020; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023). Furthermore, the digital labor underpinning Indian feminist and anti-caste movements remains largely under-theorized and undervalued, despite its centrality to sustaining online activism (Pain, 2020). Although social media platforms offer a latent capacity for civic engagement, India's educational and policy frameworks have yet to institutionalize comprehensive media literacy models that enable citizens particularly youth to move beyond performative or "slacktivist" participation

toward sustained, justice-oriented civic action (Lee et al., 2021; Erdem et al., 2022; Tuli & Danish, 2021; Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2020; Jayachandran, 2018; Sarwatay et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a critical review of civic engagement in India by examining the intersection of media literacy and hashtag activism within the digital public sphere. By synthesizing existing literature across media studies, digital activism, and civic education, the study seeks to address gaps between research, praxis, and policy, and to explore how media literacy can be strategically integrated into digital activism to foster a more inclusive, democratic, and ethically resilient public sphere in India.

1.1. Objectives of the study:

- To critically examine hashtag activism as a form of civic engagement within the Indian digital public sphere.
- To analyse the role of media literacy as a democratic competency shaping the quality and effectiveness of hashtag-based civic participation.
- To identify and synthesise key media literacy dimensions including critical evaluation, ethical participation, and algorithmic awareness and assess their influence on digital civic engagement outcomes.
- To conceptually link media literacy with digital citizenship practices in India, highlighting implications for policy and pedagogy aimed at fostering informed civic participation.

1.1.1. Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework for this study integrates three interrelated dimensions that shape civic engagement in India's digital ecosystem: Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as the competency required for participation, the Digital Public Sphere as the space in which participation occurs, and Digital Citizenship as the nature and quality of engagement. Together, these dimensions explain how hashtag activism operates within the Indian digital public sphere and how media literacy mediates its democratic potential.

1.2. Media and Information Literacy (UNESCO MIL Framework):

This study is anchored in the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework, which conceptualizes literacy as a composite of skills enabling individuals to access, analyze, evaluate, create, reflect upon, and act through diverse forms of media and information (Lee et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). MIL is understood not merely as technical competence but as a critical social practice that interrogates power relations embedded within media systems, including ideological framing, algorithmic governance, and platform-driven visibility regimes (Lee et al., 2021; Share & McBride, 2022).

In the Indian context marked by information disorder, political polarization, and unequal access MIL assumes a transformative role rather than a functional one (McDougall & Rega, 2022; Moyo, 2020). The framework operationalizes MIL through five interlinked competencies. Access refers to the ability to locate and retrieve relevant information using digital tools (Hassan et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2020). Analysis and evaluation involve critically assessing the credibility, accuracy, bias, and hidden agendas of media sources (Lee et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022; Felton et al., 2023; Syakir et al., 2023). Creation emphasizes the production of original content and counter-narratives that challenge dominant discourses, particularly by marginalized groups (Hassan et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2020; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023). Reflection foregrounds ethical judgment, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility in digital conduct (Hassan et al., 2022; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Yue et al., 2019). Finally, action refers to the application of these competencies for collective problem-solving, advocacy, and civic participation (Hassan et al., 2022; Jayachandran, 2018).

High levels of MIL provide what has been described as “epistemic vigilance,” enabling citizens to navigate a media environment shaped by misinformation, political polarization, and the “Murdochization” of public discourse

(Paul & Dowling, 2018; Jayachandran, 2018). Within this framework, MIL functions as a prerequisite for meaningful digital citizenship rather than an optional skill.

1.3. The Digital Public Sphere: Networked and Contested:

The second pillar of the framework conceptualizes the Digital Public Sphere as an extension and transformation of the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical debate into a networked, platform-mediated communicative space characterized by decentralized, many-to-many interactions (Lee et al., 2021; Burke & Şen, 2018; Edingo, 2021). Unlike the hierarchical broadcast model, digital platforms facilitate dialogic exchanges where statements function as invitations for participation rather than finalized narratives (Kumar & Thapa, 2014; Pathak & Shelat & Bhatia, 2021).

In India, this networked public sphere operates as a contested terrain shaped by fluid “mediascapes,” where legacy media content intersects with user-generated narratives (Harshman, 2018). Crucially, it enables the emergence of counter-publics, wherein subaltern groups including Dalit activists, intersectional feminists, and protest collectives such as the Women of Shaheen Bagh use digital platforms to narrate lived experiences and resist hegemonic “Manustream” representations (Thakur, 2019; Paul & Dowling, 2018; Edwards et al., 2021; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022).

However, this public sphere is not inherently egalitarian. Platformization introduces algorithmic power, whereby corporate logics curate visibility, reinforce echo chambers, and polarize public opinion (Lee et al., 2021; Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). A critical understanding of the digital public sphere must therefore also account for digital materialism, recognizing that digital participation is sustained by global networks of labor, data extraction, and infrastructural inequality that often reproduce older forms of oppression (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016). Consequently, participation within the digital public sphere is deeply conditioned by users’ media literacy competencies.

1.4. Digital Citizenship: Participatory and Performative Engagement:

The third pillar conceptualizes Digital Citizenship as the capacity to use ICTs for civic, political, and cultural participation, marking a shift from “dutiful” citizenship toward “actualizing” forms rooted in self-expression, networking, and cause-oriented action (Cho et al., 2020; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2018; Allaste & Cairns, 2024; Yue et al., 2019). Within this framework, digital citizenship manifests along a continuum rather than a binary, encompassing both participatory and performative modes of engagement.

Participatory (thick) engagement, associated with actualizing citizenship, involves justice-oriented practices that seek to uncover structural inequalities and mobilize sustained collective action (Share & McBride, 2022; Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2020; Phan & Kloos, 2023). In the Indian context, this form of engagement is evident in sustained mobilizations such as protests against the NRC-CAA enactments, the #DalitLivesMatter movement, and organized agrarian resistance (Roy et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2021).

In contrast, performative (thin) engagement often labeled “slacktivism” or “clicktivism” includes symbolic acts such as liking, sharing, retweeting, or temporarily affiliating with hashtags (Ryland, 2013; Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Cho et al., 2020; Felton et al., 2023). While frequently critiqued as superficial, scholars argue that these acts are not politically inconsequential; they function as entry points into civic participation by generating affective solidarity, visibility, and agenda-setting potential (Cho et al., 2020; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2021; Paul & Dowling, 2018).

The framework emphasizes civic intentionality as the mediating factor that determines whether digital citizenship remains performative or evolves into participatory engagement (Relly & Pakanati, 2020; Chu, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Civic intentionality reflects the purposeful use of media to disrupt inequality and contribute to the public good. In the Indian context, effective digital citizenship often assumes a

hybrid form, where online mobilization translates into offline protest and institutional engagement, illustrating a movement from cyberspace to urban space (Paul & Dowling, 2018).

1.5. Integrative Logic of the Framework:

Taken together, the framework posits that media literacy competencies shape how citizens navigate the digital public sphere and determine whether hashtag activism results in participatory or merely performative civic engagement. While the digital public sphere offers visibility and access, it is media literacy that enables critical evaluation, ethical participation, and sustained action. Hashtag activism, therefore, is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently superficial; its democratic value in India is contingent upon the depth of media literacy and civic intentionality exercised by digital citizens.

2. Review of Literature:

The growing body of literature on digital civic engagement reveals a complex interaction between citizens' technical access to digital platforms and the critical media literacies required for meaningful democratic participation. This review synthesizes scholarship across four interconnected areas: (I) studies on media literacy and civic engagement, (II) research on hashtag activism and digital movements, (III) Indian and global perspectives on digital participation, and (IV) identified gaps related to fragmentation and the lack of a sustained literacy focus.

2.1. Studies on Media Literacy and Civic Engagement:

Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes Media and Information Literacy (MIL) not merely as a technical skill set but as a multidimensional civic competency that enables individuals to function as active democratic participants in digitally mediated societies (Erdem et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2022; Jayachandran, 2018; Yue et al., 2019). MIL encompasses the abilities to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act upon media content, thereby supporting what scholars describe as "actualizing citizenship," where individuals engage directly

with peer networks to source information, deliberate, and organize civic action (Yue et al., 2019). A significant shift in the literature highlights the transition from functional media literacy to critical media literacy, which interrogates systems of power, ideological framing, and the “human constructedness” of information (Lee et al., 2021; Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Ryland, 2013). Within this framework, epistemic cognition plays a central role, requiring citizens to develop clear epistemic aims and reliable verification processes to navigate “truth decay,” misinformation, and algorithmic bias (Felton et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Empirical studies demonstrate that higher levels of media literacy significantly predict the integrity of civic participation, particularly among youth, by reducing deviant online behaviours and fostering ethical engagement (Hassan et al., 2022). Media literacy education is also identified as a primary safeguard against “information disorder,” equipping citizens to recognize misinformation, alternative facts, and covert ideological agendas (Lee et al., 2021; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Furthermore, digital media literacy has been shown to enhance civic intentionality by providing individuals with the “latent capacity” to find a public voice and participate in collective problem-solving (Chu, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Conversely, the absence of critical media literacy correlates strongly with vulnerability to misinformation, political polarization, and “dark participation” within extremist or manipulative digital subcultures (Mihailidis et al., 2021; Boivin & Johnson, 2024; Ghergut-Babii et al., 2025).

2.2. Research on Hashtag Activism and Digital Movements:

Hashtag activism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary digital protest, functioning as “social metadata” that organizes discourse, aggregates voices, and facilitates the formation of networked publics (Ryland, 2013; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Holze & Zitzelsbergera, 2022). Scholars describe this phenomenon as part of a broader shift from “dutiful” citizenship toward “actualizing” or personalized forms of engagement, where civic participation

is expressive, affective, and self-motivated rather than institutionally prescribed (Lee et al., 2021; Cho et al., 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). The literature on digital movements emphasizes connective action, wherein individuals share personalized narratives and digital artifacts across loosely coordinated networks rather than through formal organizational structures (Subramanian & Sharma, 2022; Allaste & Cairns, 2024). Hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter exemplify how movements create “intimate publics,” enabling individuals to forge affective communities through shared testimonies of systemic injustice (Pain, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). These movements often rely on “anchor tweets” and narrative threads that sustain engagement and bridge online discourse with offline mobilization (Edingo, 2021).

A central debate within this literature concerns the critique of “slacktivism” or “thin” engagement, characterized by low-effort actions such as liking, sharing, or using hashtags (Ryland, 2013; Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Cho et al., 2020). While critics argue that such actions lack substantive political impact, emerging research suggests that these practices function as gateways to deeper civic involvement by generating visibility, affective solidarity, and agenda-setting momentum for marginalized issues (Tuli & Danish, 2021; Cho et al., 2020). Small discursive acts such as retweeting or hashtag use thus operate as “textual like-buttons” that signal alignment and can evolve into sustained participation when supported by media literacy competencies (Holze & Zitzelsberger, 2022; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2021).

Indian and Global Perspectives: Globally, research on digital activism and media literacy remains heavily Western-centric, with a dominant focus on movements emerging from the United States and Europe, such as #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FridaysForFuture (Cho et al., 2020; Lozano-Díaz & Fernández-Prados, 2021). While global studies highlight the use of hashtag activism to build transnational coalitions such as during international health crises like COVID-19 they often rely on Anglo-Eurocentric

models of democracy and media literacy that do not fully translate to the socio-cultural realities of the Global South (Liu et al., 2022; Mihailidis et al., 2021; Sarwatay et al., 2021). In contrast, Indian scholarship foregrounds a distinctive digital environment shaped by rapid platform expansion – exceeding 500 million users alongside deep-rooted inequalities based on caste, class, gender, and geography (Yadav & Verma, 2025; Relly & Pakanati, 2020). Studies document the emergence of Dalit counter-publics, where marginalized communities use social media to “produce their presence,” narrate oppressive histories, and resist dominant “Manustream” media narratives (Thakur, 2019). Movements such as the Rohith Vemula protests and #DalitLivesMatter demonstrate the capacity of digital platforms to mobilize across regional and linguistic boundaries (Thakur, 2019; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023).

Indian feminist digital activism further illustrates the political potential of hashtag movements. Campaigns such as #MeTooIndia and #LahuKaLagaan are widely interpreted as part of a “fourth wave” of feminism that leverages digital platforms to demand accountability from entrenched patriarchal institutions (Jain, 2020; Pain, 2020). Additionally, platforms played a pivotal role in mobilizing dissent against the NRC- CAA enactments, facilitating real-time coordination, emotional storytelling, and sustained protest narratives (Roy et al., 2021; Bansal et al., 2024; Ram, 2024). Initiatives such as Dalit Camera and the global visibility of the Women of Shaheen Bagh further demonstrate how subaltern counter-publics use digital archiving and storytelling to project political agency (Paul & Dowling, 2018; Edwards et al., 2021; Edingo, 2021).

2.3. Identified Gaps:

Fragmentation and Lack of Literacy Focus: Despite the proliferation of scholarship on digital movements, significant gaps persist. First, the literature remains fragmented, with studies on media expansion, activism, and civic engagement often operating in isolation, leading to weak integration between research, praxis, and policy (Edwards et al., 2021).

Second, much of the research on hashtag activism prioritizes metrics such as reach, visibility, or impact, while neglecting the learning processes through which participants acquire the media literacy necessary for meaningful engagement (Ryland, 2013). Third, existing frameworks frequently assume a universality of digital experience rooted in Global North contexts, overlooking how media literacy is negotiated within highly stratified, non-Western societies (Erdem et al., 2022; McDougall & Rega, 2022). In India, the digital divide functions as a “fourth layer of intersectional oppression,” often marginalizing rural, low-income, and caste-oppressed voices even within justice-oriented digital movements (Jain, 2020; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023). Finally, current digital citizenship interventions remain largely ad hoc and safety-oriented, emphasizing individual risk mitigation rather than systemic critical awareness and structural transformation (Lee et al., 2021; Sarwatay et al., 2021). The intersection of citizen journalism with caste and other forms of structural marginalization also remains underexplored within digital journalism studies (Paul & Dowling, 2018).

3. Methodology:

3.1. Research Design: The study adopts a qualitative secondary research design, relying exclusively on existing scholarly literature and institutional documents to examine the relationship between media literacy and hashtag-based civic engagement in the digital public sphere. Given the conceptual and interpretive nature of the research, no primary data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, or experiments were employed.

3.2. Research Approach: A narrative literature review approach was used to synthesize existing research on media literacy, digital citizenship, hashtag activism, and civic engagement. This approach was selected to allow for a comprehensive and critical interpretation of diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical findings across disciplines such as mass communication, media studies, political communication, and digital sociology.

3.3. Data Sources: Secondary data were collected from multiple authoritative sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025
- Books and edited volumes on media literacy and digital activism
- Policy reports and frameworks from organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, and the Election Commission of India
- Published case studies and analytical reports on hashtag activism and digital civic movements in the Indian context
- Academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science were consulted to ensure the credibility and relevance of the sources.

3.4. Data Analysis: The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified through iterative reading and coding of the selected texts. These themes included media literacy competencies, forms of digital civic participation, the role of social media platforms in shaping civic discourse, and the distinction between performative and substantive civic engagement. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, convergences, and critical gaps within existing literature.

3.5. Analytical Framework: The study draws upon established conceptual frameworks of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and the notion of the digital public sphere to interpret the findings. By synthesizing insights across disciplines, the paper develops a conceptual understanding of how media literacy competencies influence the quality and depth of civic engagement in hashtag-driven digital spaces.

3.6. Ethical Considerations: As the study is based entirely on secondary data from publicly available sources, it does not involve human participants and therefore does not require ethical clearance. All sources used in the study have been appropriately cited in accordance with academic standards.

4. Media Literacy and Hashtag Activism in the Digital Public Sphere:

In the contemporary digital public sphere, hashtag activism has emerged as a central mechanism through which civic engagement is articulated, negotiated, and made visible. The convergence of media literacy and hashtag-based participation reveals both the democratic promise of networked publics and the structural constraints imposed by platform architectures. In the Indian context, this interaction is shaped by how citizens navigate technological affordances, algorithmic governance, and their own civic intentionality within digitally mediated spaces.

4.1. Operation of Hashtag Activism in Digital Spaces:

Hashtag activism operates as a form of connective action that aggregates individual expressions into collective discourses. Functioning as social metadata or “metadata tags,” hashtags enable the categorization, retrieval, and circulation of issue-based conversations across platforms (Ryland, 2013). As tools of collective action framing, hashtags offer interpretive packages that define social problems, attribute responsibility, and legitimate demands for change (Ryland, 2013). Through this framing function, hashtag activism facilitates the formation of “hashtag publics” networked spaces where political discourse is generated outside institutional media settings (Edwards et al., 2021). In these spaces, hashtags often create “intimate publics,” wherein affective narratives and personal testimonies foster solidarity among strangers, as seen in movements such as #MeTooIndia and #DalitLivesMatter (Pain, 2020). Activist communication within these publics relies on discursive strategies such as gate watching and audiencing, which allow users to curate, comment on, and circulate information in real time while bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Ryland, 2013; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023). This participatory logic has enabled the emergence of “new protest journalism,” where marginalized communities act as citizen journalists to document caste- and race-based injustices overlooked

by mainstream “Manustream” media (Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023; Thakur, 2019). Anchor tweets and affinity tweets further structure these conversations by generating narrative threads and sustaining discursive visibility across networks (Edingo, 2021).

4.2. Role of Platforms and Algorithms:

While hashtag activism appears decentralized, its visibility and reach are profoundly shaped by platform infrastructures. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp operate as sociotechnical systems governed by commercial imperatives rather than democratic values (Lee et al., 2021; Valle et al., 2024). Their choice architectures prioritize ease of sharing and engagement while obscuring processes of verification and source evaluation (Boivin & Johnson, 2024). Algorithmic curation systems privilege content that generates high interaction, often favoring sensational or polarizing narratives over informational accuracy (Kaun & Uldam, 2017; Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). This logic contributes to the amplification of misinformation, the formation of ideological echo chambers, and the marginalization of slower, deliberative forms of civic discourse. Moreover, the political economy of platforms creates structural disparities in participation, as visibility increasingly depends on capital, technical expertise, and paid promotion (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Kaun & Uldam, 2017). Algorithmic bias can also reproduce existing social hierarchies, with language datasets embedding gendered or caste- based exclusions that result in shadow banning or reduced reach for activist voices (Pain, 2020). Additionally, digital activism operates within a context of permanence. Unlike ephemeral offline protest, online expressions acquire a “digital afterlife,” where content can be archived, retrieved, and repurposed by employers, state actors, or political adversaries, increasing the risks associated with participation (Lee et al., 2021; Valle et al., 2024). This structural condition underscores the necessity of heightened digital consciousness and critical engagement.

5. Media Literacy Competencies for Meaningful Engagement:

Within this algorithmically governed environment, meaningful civic engagement depends on media literacy competencies that extend beyond technical proficiency. Critical media literacy interrogates the relationship between information, power, and participation, enabling citizens to navigate digital spaces with epistemic responsibility (Share & McBride, 2022). Scholars identify five interrelated competencies essential for informed hashtag activism: access, analysis, creation, reflection, and action (Middaugh et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2022). Access involves the ability to curate information flows and navigate diverse digital tools effectively (Hassan et al., 2020). Analysis and evaluation require the critical assessment of credibility, bias, and ideological framing within media messages (Hassan et al., 2020). Creation enables users to produce counter-narratives and participatory content that challenge dominant discourses (Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2018; Hassan et al., 2020). Reflection emphasizes ethical responsibility and epistemic integrity, particularly in verifying information before dissemination (Felton et al., 2023). Finally, action refers to the strategic use of digital media to mobilize networks and address community concerns through advocacy and collective problem-solving (Felton et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2020). These competencies are further strengthened by civic intentionality – values such as agency, care, persistence, and emancipatory commitment that orient digital participation toward democratic outcomes (Middaugh et al., 2022; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). In practice, media-literate engagement also requires “internet savvy,” including an understanding of platform cultures, memes, humor, and aesthetic strategies that enhance the spread ability and resonance of civic messages (Middaugh et al., 2022).

5.1. Symbolic versus Substantive Participation:

Digital civic engagement exists along a continuum ranging from symbolic expression to substantive political action.

Symbolic or “thin” participation—often labeled slacktivism or clicktivism—includes low-effort acts such as liking posts, sharing hashtags, or changing profile pictures (Ryland, 2013; Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Cho et al., 2020). While frequently criticized as superficial or “silly citizenship,” such acts play an important role in issue visibility, movement identity formation, and agenda setting, often serving as an entry point into civic engagement (Cho et al., 2020; Peterson, 2019). Substantive or “thick” participation, by contrast, involves instrumental actions aimed at tangible political outcomes, such as organizing protests, fundraising for legal causes, or influencing policy decisions, exemplified by movements like #LahuKaLagaan in India (Cho et al., 2020; Jain, 2020; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023). This mode of engagement is characterized by civic intentionality, epistemic vigilance, and strategic outreach to decision-makers rather than peer affirmation alone (Felton et al., 2023; Boivin & Johnson, 2024). In contexts of repression or structural inequality, substantive participation may also entail forms of digital disobedience, where online tools are used to disrupt unjust power relations rather than merely denounce them (Peterson, 2019). Crucially, media literacy mediates the transformation of symbolic participation into substantive civic action. When supported by critical education and ethical frameworks, small expressive acts can evolve into sustained democratic engagement; without such literacy, digital participation risks remaining performative, fragmented, and politically inconsequential (Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2021; Sharma et al., 2022)

6. Discussion:

The integration of media literacy into the digital public sphere fundamentally reshapes how citizens encounter, interpret, and act upon civic issues. Rather than remaining passive recipients of algorithmically curated information, media-literate citizens are better positioned to engage in a transformative civic praxis that interrogates power, resists misinformation, and reorients digital participation toward democratic ends.

6.1. Media Literacy and the Reshaping of Civic Engagement Outcomes: Media literacy functions as a critical determinant of the quality and integrity of civic engagement in digital environments. It equips individuals with the cognitive and ethical capacities required to recognize algorithmic bias, information disorder, and the socially constructed nature of news and political narratives (Lee et al., 2021; Pathak-Shelat, 2018). As a result, media literacy reshapes engagement outcomes by shifting participation from low-effort, performative acts toward more intentional, problem-oriented civic practices (Cho et al., 2020; Share & McBride, 2022; Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2020).

Empirical scholarship suggests that media literacy predicts higher moral conduct online and reduces susceptibility to deviant or harmful participatory behaviors (Hassan et al., 2022). By fostering epistemic vigilance, media-literate citizens become capable of evaluating evidence, identifying misinformation, and transforming themselves from passive users into civic problem identifiers and solution innovators (Sharma et al., 2022; Felton et al., 2023). This transition aligns with the model of “actualizing citizenship,” wherein individuals engage through horizontal networks that prioritize agency, expression, and collective problem-solving over institutional compliance (Yue et al., 2019). Crucially, media literacy also facilitates civic intentionality ensuring that participation is guided by values such as care, agency, persistence, and emancipation rather than accidental exposure or algorithmic nudging (Chu, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). In this sense, symbolic acts such as hashtag use or content sharing acquire democratic significance only when embedded within a critically informed framework that enables sustained civic action (Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2018; Felton et al., 2023; Daskal, 2017).

6.2. Implications for Democracy and Participation:

The expansion of digital media has reconfigured the public sphere into a networked communicative space defined by peer-to-peer interaction, decentralized agenda-setting, and

the erosion of traditional elite gatekeeping (Lee et al., 2021; Greene et al., 2018; Pathak-Shelat, 2018). This transformation has widened opportunities for democratic participation, particularly for younger citizens who increasingly engage through personalized, expressive, and affinity-based modes of “actualizing” rather than “dutiful” citizenship (Allaste & Cairns, 2024; Cho et al., 2020; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Media literacy is central to sustaining democratic participation within this environment. It enables agonistic pluralism, allowing diverse groups to contest dominant narratives while remaining committed to democratic dialogue (Jayachandran, 2018; Kumar & Thapa, 2014). Through hashtag publics and counter-publics, marginalized communities can “produce their presence” and challenge hegemonic representations within mainstream discourse (Edwards et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Thakur, 2019; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023).

However, the absence of critical literacy introduces significant democratic risks. Polarization, echo chambers, truth decay, and dark participation threaten public trust and deliberative norms, fostering cultures of contempt and misinformation (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025; Christ & De Abreu, 2020; Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022; Mihailidis et al., 2021). Media literacy addresses these challenges by emphasizing epistemic integrity and individual responsibility for verifying information before its circulation, thereby reinforcing the normative foundations of democratic discourse (Felton et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2020). At the same time, structural inequalities in access and skills produce participation gaps that risk excluding already marginalized populations, leading to conditions of “failed citizenship” for those disconnected from or disadvantaged within digital systems (Lee et al., 2021; Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Phan & Kloos, 2023).

6.3. Indian Context-Specific Insights:

India’s digital public sphere presents a paradoxical landscape characterized by rapid platform expansion alongside entrenched socio-economic, caste-based, and

linguistic inequalities (Chadha & Harlow, 2015; Kalorth et al., 2020; Relly & Pakanati, 2020). Within this context, media literacy plays a crucial role in determining whether digital participation amplifies democratic inclusion or reproduces structural exclusion. Subaltern digital activism illustrates the emancipatory potential of media-literate engagement. Dalit activists and platforms such as Dalit Camera employ digital archiving and hashtag activism as forms of “reverse archiving,” resisting the dominance of “Manustream” media by narrating histories of oppression and contemporary injustice (Thakur, 2019; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022; Paul & Dowling, 2018). Similarly, feminist movements such as #MeTooIndia and #LahuKaLagaan exemplify India’s fourth-wave feminism, though they also reveal tensions around urban bias, linguistic privilege, and elite participation (Jain, 2020; Baker & Manchanda Rodrigues, 2023; Pain, 2020).

Hybrid movements including the Right to Information campaign, NRC-CAA protests, #FarmersProtest, and #CAAProtests demonstrate how digital tools complement offline mobilization, with social media amplifying visibility while ground-level organizing remains indispensable due to the rural digital divide (Roy et al., 2021; Relly & Pakanati, 2020; Ram, 2024; Edingo, 2021). Importantly, the digital divide in India operates as a fourth layer of intersectional oppression, silencing rural, unlettered, and economically marginalized voices even within ostensibly inclusive digital movements (Pain, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Relly & Pakanati, 2020).

6.4. Policy and Pedagogical Implications:

The findings underscore the need for a paradigmatic shift in both policy and pedagogy from narrow technical fluency toward critical, justice-oriented media literacy. Educational practices must move away from “banking” models of instruction and adopt problem-posing pedagogies that engage learners with real-world controversies, power relations, and systemic inequities (Share & McBride, 2022; Robinson & Pant, 2023; Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2020).

Curricula should incorporate Critical Race Digital Literacy to help learners understand how algorithms, data systems, and platform governance can reinforce social hierarchies while appearing neutral (Lee et al., 2021). Media literacy must also be integrated across disciplines rather than confined to civics education, enabling interdisciplinary inquiry and critical reasoning across knowledge domains (Lee et al., 2021).

At the policy level, national media literacy strategies should move beyond infrastructure development to support inclusive, lifelong learning grounded in lived digital realities (Boivin & Johnson, 2024; Jayachandran, 2018; Sarwatay et al., 2021). Frameworks such as UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy model which emphasizes Access, Analyze, Evaluate, Create, and Act offer a holistic foundation for developing citizens as co-constructors of the digital public sphere (Erdem et al., 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Felton et al., 2023). Finally, strengthening democratic participation in digital spaces requires collaborative governance involving the state, educators, platforms, and citizens. Such a triadic approach is essential for balancing accountability, protecting civic freedoms, and sustaining an informed, participatory digital public sphere in India (Sharma et al., 2022; Jayachandran, 2018).

7. Conclusion:

This paper has critically examined the relationship between media literacy and hashtag activism within India's evolving digital public sphere, arguing that the democratic potential of hashtag-based civic engagement is contingent upon citizens' media literacy competencies. While hashtag activism has expanded opportunities for visibility, participation, and counter-public formation, the study demonstrates that, in the absence of critical media literacy, such engagement often remains symbolic, performative, and vulnerable to misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and polarization. Media literacy thus emerges not as an auxiliary skill but as a foundational democratic capacity that shapes whether digital participation contributes to informed civic engagement or

reproduces superficial and fragmented public discourse. By synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship on digital activism, media literacy, and democratic participation, this review advances a conceptual framework that links media literacy competencies critical evaluation, ethical participation, civic intentionality, and algorithmic awareness with differentiated outcomes of civic engagement. Theoretically, the paper contributes to debates on digital citizenship by repositioning media literacy as a mediating variable between technological affordances and democratic action. In doing so, it bridges gaps between Western-centric models of digital participation and the socio-culturally stratified realities of the Indian context, where caste, gender, language, and access continue to shape who participates, how participation unfolds, and whose voices gain legitimacy in the digital public sphere.

The study is not without limitations. As a qualitative narrative review relying exclusively on secondary data, the analysis is constrained by the scope, depth, and representativeness of existing literature and policy documents. The absence of primary empirical data limits the ability to capture lived user experiences, platform-specific practices, and regional variations in media literacy and hashtag activism across India's diverse socio-political landscape. Moreover, reliance on published sources may underrepresent informal, vernacular, and ephemeral forms of digital activism that are less likely to be documented in academic or institutional archives.

These limitations, however, open important avenues for future research. Empirical studies employing mixed-methods approaches such as digital ethnography, discourse analysis of hashtag publics, surveys of media literacy competencies, and platform-specific algorithm audits can deepen understanding of how Indian citizens navigate civic engagement online. Future research should also foreground vernacular digital cultures, regional languages, and rural participation to address existing urban and English-language biases in digital activism scholarship. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how media literacy education interventions influence civic engagement outcomes over time would offer valuable insights

for both theory and policy. Finally, comparative research across Global South contexts could further refine theoretical models of media literacy and hashtag activism by situating them within diverse political, cultural, and technological ecosystems. In conclusion, this paper underscores that strengthening India's digital democracy requires more than expanding digital access or platform participation. It necessitates sustained investment in critical media literacy as a civic infrastructure—one that empowers citizens to move beyond symbolic expression toward informed, ethical, and justice-oriented participation in the digital public sphere.

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