Intersections of Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

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From Hashtags to Ballots: Social Media and the Mobilization of Women's Political Participation in Contemporary India

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Abstract

In contemporary India, social media has become a significant political arena reshaping democratic participation and political mobilization, particularly for women who have historically faced structural and cultural barriers to political engagement. Digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp increasingly function as spaces where political identities are formed, issues are debated, and collective action is organized. This paper examines how social media contributes to the political mobilization of women in India, tracing the movement from online political expression—manifested through hashtags, campaigns, and digital advocacy—to offline participation in electoral processes, political movements, and democratic decision-making. Anchored in the concepts of political communication, media literacy, and digital citizenship, the study analyses how women use social media to access political information, challenge dominant political narratives, and negotiate visibility within the digital public sphere. The paper also critically addresses the political constraints embedded in platform-driven participation, including gendered political harassment, disinformation, algorithmic bias, and unequal access to digital resources, which shape the nature and limits of women's political agency.

Using qualitative analysis of selected social media campaigns, political discourse, and instances of women-led digital mobilization in India, this research argues that social media

has reconfigured the modes of women's political participation by lowering entry barriers and enabling networked forms of collective action. However, the paper contends that the democratic potential of these platforms remains contingent upon political awareness, media literacy, and institutional safeguards that ensure inclusive and safe participation. By situating women's digital engagement within broader political processes, the study contributes to ongoing debates on mediated democracy, gendered participation, and the evolving nature of political mobilization in the digital age.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has profoundly transformed the nature of political participation across democracies. In India, the world's largest democracy, social media platforms have emerged as critical arenas of political communication, campaigning, and mobilization. These platforms have not only altered how political actors communicate with citizens but have also reshaped how citizens—particularly marginalized groups—engage with politics. Among these groups, women occupy a paradoxical position: while they remain underrepresented in formal political institutions, they are increasingly visible and vocal within digital political spaces.

1.1 Background Study

The relationship between media and women's political participation in India must be understood against a broader historical and socio-political backdrop marked by uneven access to public spaces and decision-making power. For decades, political communication in India was dominated by print and broadcast media, which largely reflected elite, male-centric perspectives and offered limited scope for women's voices. Women's political concerns—particularly those related to everyday experiences such as unpaid care work, bodily autonomy, safety, and access to welfare—were often marginalized or framed through patriarchal lenses.

The liberalization of India's media landscape in the 1990s expanded the number of communication channels but did

not fundamentally alter gendered power relations within political discourse. Mainstream news media continued to privilege political elites and party leadership, where women remained underrepresented. As a result, women's political participation was frequently confined to voting behavior or symbolic representation rather than agenda-setting and deliberation.

The advent of digital media and social networking platforms in the early 2000s marked a significant shift in this landscape. Rapid growth in mobile phone usage and internet penetration—particularly after the expansion of affordable data services—enabled wider sections of the population to access online platforms. For women, social media introduced new possibilities for political engagement by reducing reliance on physical mobility, formal organizational membership, and traditional media gatekeeping. Digital platforms allowed women to articulate political identities, share lived experiences, and connect with wider publics in ways that were previously difficult within offline political spaces. At the same time, the digital transformation of politics in India has unfolded within deeply unequal social structures. Gender norms governing respectability, visibility, and speech continue to shape women's participation online. While some women have leveraged social media to gain political influence and visibility, others face exclusion due to lack of access, digital literacy, or exposure to online harassment. The coexistence of empowerment and constraint characterizes women's engagement with digital political spaces.

This background study situates the present research within these broader transformations in media, politics, and gender relations in India. It highlights why social media has emerged as a critical site for examining contemporary forms of women's political participation and why a nuanced analysis—attentive to both opportunities and limitations—is necessary.

1.2 Importance of the Study

- This study highlights the growing role of social media in shaping women's political participation in India.

- It helps understand how digital platforms create new opportunities for women to express political opinions and engage in public debates.
- The study draws attention to the challenges women face online, such as harassment, misinformation, and unequal access to technology.
- It contributes to gender and media studies by examining political participation from a feminist perspective.
- The research is important for policymakers and educators working on digital literacy and women's empowerment.
- It provides insight into how online political engagement can influence offline participation, such as voting and protests.
- The study adds to existing literature on digital democracy in the Global South, especially in the Indian context.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study examines the role of social media in shaping and mobilizing women's political participation in contemporary India. It focuses on major digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which are widely used for political communication and activism. The scope of the study includes women's engagement in political discussion, issue-based advocacy, digital campaigns, and the transition from online participation to offline political actions such as voting, protests, and community mobilization. The study is limited to the Indian socio-political context and does not attempt a comparative analysis with other countries. It primarily adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing on secondary literature, documented case studies, and examples of women-led digital movements. While the study considers intersectional factors such as class, caste, and access to technology, it does not conduct primary surveys or statistical analysis. The scope is confined to understanding patterns, opportunities, and challenges of women's political participation through social media rather than measuring electoral outcomes or platform-specific performance metrics.

2.0 Gendered Online Harassment: The "Silencing Effect"

The phenomenon of gendered harassment in India is not merely an incidental byproduct of digital discourse; it is a systemic tool of political exclusion. Research by Amnesty International India (2020) revealed that 1 in 7 tweets mentioning women politicians in India was "problematic" or "abusive." When broken down by identity, the statistics show a clear intersectional hostility: women from marginalized castes or religious minorities received 94% more abuse than their counterparts from dominant groups.

This hostility manifests through "Gender trolling," a coordinated practice where mobs use "shaming" tactics to push women out of the digital public sphere. In the Indian context, this often takes the form of *character assassination*, where a woman's political stance is delegitimized by questioning her "modesty" (*maryada*) or "sanskaar" (traditional values).

- The Chilling Effect: This creates a "spiral of silence." When a woman witnesses another being targeted with threats of sexual violence or doxxing (the leaking of private information like home addresses), she is statistically more likely to self-censor.

- Institutional Failure: The legal framework, primarily the Information Technology Act (2000) and sections of the BNS (formerly IPC), often proves inadequate. Police sensitivity toward "virtual" threats remains low, and the anonymity of the "troll farm" makes accountability nearly impossible.

2.1 Disinformation, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Bias

The architecture of Indian digital politics is heavily reliant on "dark social" channels—specifically WhatsApp. Unlike the open architecture of X (Twitter), WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption creates "information silos" where disinformation is shielded from fact-checkers.

- The "Moral Guardian" Trap: Disinformation campaigns in India frequently weaponize the trope of the *Bharatiya Nari* (the ideal Indian woman). Fake news stories often frame specific policies or candidates as threats to "family values"

or "religious sanctity," leveraging women's roles as primary caregivers to trigger emotional sharing.

- Algorithmic Masculinity: Platform algorithms are designed for "stickiness," prioritizing high-arousal emotions like anger and outrage. Because feminist discourse often requires nuance and historical context, it is structurally disadvantaged by algorithms that reward the "punchy," often aggressive rhetoric of patriarchal nationalism.

- State Surveillance: The use of sophisticated spyware and the tightening of intermediary guidelines have turned the smartphone from a tool of liberation into a potential "pocket informant." For women activists in regions like Chhattisgarh or during movements like the Anti-CAA protests, the fear of Pegasus-style surveillance has led to the adoption of "digital hiding"—communicating through ephemeral messaging or leaving platforms entirely, which diminishes their political visibility.

2.2 The Digital Divide and Intersectional Inequalities

While India has the world's second-largest internet user base, the "Gender Digital Divide" remains a significant barrier to substantive mobilization.

- The Gatekeeper Phenomenon: In many rural Indian households, the smartphone is a "shared asset," usually owned by the male head of the family. A woman's access to political content is often mediated or monitored by male relatives, preventing her from engaging in "subversive" or independent political exploration.

- Caste and Digital Capital: The "Hashtags to Ballots" transition is more seamless for Savarna (upper-caste) women who possess the linguistic capital (English proficiency) and social capital to navigate digital platforms. Conversely, Dalit and Adivasi women face double-marginalization; they are targeted by both gendered and casteist slurs (e.g., the weaponization of the "quota" debate), making the digital public sphere a site of trauma rather than empowerment.

- Linguistic Exclusion: The "English-Hindi" duopoly of platform interfaces ignores the political agency of the "Vernacular Web." Women communicating in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, or Marathi often find that platform safety tools and moderation bots are less effective in their languages, leaving them more exposed to unmoderated abuse.

3. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing research on women's political participation in digital spaces, with a focus on India. It highlights how social media serves as a tool for political mobilization, the challenges women face in online political engagement, and the role of digital literacy, networked activism, and platform governance in shaping participation. The review identifies both opportunities and limitations of social media for women's empowerment, situating the current study within broader debates on gender, media, and democracy.

3.1 Literature Review 1: Women, Social Media, and Political Participation

Banaji and Buckingham (2019) examine how digital media influences civic and political participation among marginalized groups, with a particular focus on women and young citizens. Their study argues that social media can expand political awareness and engagement by providing accessible platforms for expression and discussion. However, they caution that digital participation does not automatically translate into empowerment, as online engagement is shaped by existing social inequalities. The authors emphasize the importance of media literacy and socio-cultural context in determining how effectively women can use digital platforms for political participation. This study highlights both the opportunities and limitations of social media in enhancing women's political agency in unequal societies like India.

3.2 Literature Review 2: Digital Feminism and Hashtag Activism

Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) analyze the rise of digital feminist activism and the role of social media in mobilizing women around issues such as gender-based violence and political rights. Through the concept of "networked feminism," the authors explain how hashtags and online campaigns enable decentralized, issue-based mobilization beyond traditional political structures. While digital platforms help amplify women's voices and foster solidarity, the study also notes the risks of online harassment and backlash faced by women activists. This literature supports the current study by demonstrating how online feminist campaigns in India, such as #MeTooIndia, function as important tools for political mobilization while also exposing participants to gendered online violence.

3.3 Literature Review 3: Gendered Online Harassment and Digital Inequality

Amnesty International (2018) highlights how gendered harassment acts as a major barrier to women's political participation on social media. The study documents widespread abuse, threats, and intimidation faced by women engaging in political discourse, particularly those challenging dominant political ideologies. It argues that such harassment leads to self-censorship and withdrawal from online spaces, limiting democratic participation. The report also draws attention to weak platform accountability and inadequate legal responses. This literature helps explain why social media, despite its participatory potential, often reproduces patriarchal power structures that restrict women's political engagement in the digital public sphere.

3.4 Literature Review 4: Social Media and Political Mobilization in India

Krook and Sanín (2020) explore women's political participation in India, highlighting how social media complements traditional political engagement. Their research

indicates that online platforms increase awareness of electoral processes, party agendas, and policy debates among women, particularly in urban areas. However, they note persistent gaps in translating online engagement into actual decision-making power, emphasizing structural barriers such as patriarchy, economic inequality, and limited access to political networks. This study reinforces the relevance of analyzing both the enabling and constraining aspects of social media for women's political mobilization.

3.5 Literature Review 5: Networked Publics and Participatory Politics

Couldry and Hepp (2017) introduce the concept of mediated participation, emphasizing how media technologies shape political visibility and interaction. They argue that social media functions as a networked public where citizens can produce, share, and contest political messages. For women, this mediated participation allows for greater agency but is conditioned by platform algorithms, engagement metrics, and commercial logics that privilege certain voices. The study is significant for this research because it provides a theoretical lens to understand the uneven nature of digital political participation and the structural forces that shape women's visibility online.

3.6 Literature Review 6: Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

Isin and Ruppert (2015) focus on digital citizenship and media literacy as critical determinants of meaningful online political engagement. Their work emphasizes that the ability to critically evaluate political information, recognize misinformation, and participate ethically in digital spaces is essential for empowerment. In the Indian context, limited digital skills and unequal access to technology exacerbate barriers for women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. This literature underscores the importance of media literacy and digital competence as prerequisites for translating social media engagement into substantive political participation.

4. Access to Political Information and Awareness

Social media platforms serve as key sources of political information for many women, particularly younger users and first-time voters. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (X) disseminate political news, campaign messages, policy debates, and issue-based content in vernacular languages, expanding access beyond elite, English-speaking audiences. This linguistic and cultural accessibility is particularly significant in a diverse country such as India, where mainstream political communication has traditionally been dominated by urban and elite perspectives. The circulation of political content through visual formats, short videos, infographics, and personal narratives makes complex political issues more relatable and easier to engage with. For many women, especially those balancing domestic responsibilities or excluded from formal political discussions, social media provides flexible and informal modes of political learning. Political information is often encountered incidentally through social networks, peer sharing, and community groups, rather than through deliberate consumption of news media.

Research indicates that exposure to political content on social media can increase political efficacy—the belief that one's participation can make a difference—which is a crucial precursor to political action (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Increased political efficacy is particularly important for women, who have historically been socialized to view politics as a male-dominated domain. By allowing women to observe, comment on, and contribute to political conversations, social media helps normalize women's presence in political discourse. Moreover, platforms such as WhatsApp play a distinctive role in political communication in India by facilitating discussion within familial, neighborhood, and community networks. While these closed networks can reinforce existing power relations, they also enable women to engage politically within trusted social spaces. As a result, social media functions not only as a source of information but also as a site of political socialization, where political opinions are formed, contested, and refined.

4.1 Hashtags, Campaigns, and Digital Advocacy

Hashtag activism has become a prominent feature of women's political mobilization in India, enabling the aggregation of individual voices into visible collective movements. Campaigns such as #MeTooIndia, #PinjraTod, #HappyToBleed, and #WomenAgainstCAA illustrate how digital platforms facilitate the articulation of shared grievances and demands. These campaigns operate as sites of consciousness-raising, where personal experiences of discrimination, violence, and exclusion are reframed as political issues rooted in structural inequality.

Through hashtags, women are able to connect individual narratives to broader feminist and democratic struggles, transforming private experiences into public claims. This process challenges dominant political narratives that often marginalize women's concerns or treat them as apolitical. In the Indian context, where issues such as sexual violence, bodily autonomy, and citizenship are deeply contested, digital advocacy has played a crucial role in shaping public debate and media coverage.

While critics often dismiss hashtag activism as symbolic, superficial, or performative, empirical research suggests that online campaigns can have tangible political effects. Studies demonstrate that sustained digital activism can influence mainstream media agendas, shape public opinion, and exert pressure on political institutions (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). In India, women-led digital campaigns have contributed to heightened visibility of gender-based violence, accountability debates within educational institutions, and resistance to exclusionary citizenship policies. Importantly, hashtag activism also enables decentralized and leaderless forms of mobilization. Unlike traditional political movements that rely on hierarchical leadership and organizational structures, digital campaigns often operate through horizontal networks and affective solidarities. This mode of mobilization allows women from diverse backgrounds to participate according to their capacities, whether by sharing content, narrating experiences, or engaging in debate.

4.2 From Online Expression to Offline Mobilization

A critical question in debates on digital politics concerns the relationship between online engagement and offline political action. In the Indian context, several instances demonstrate that women's digital participation has extended beyond online expression to embodied forms of political mobilization. Social media has played a key role in coordinating protests, disseminating logistical information, and sustaining collective momentum during large-scale movements. The anti-CAA protests provide a significant example, where social media facilitated the organization and visibility of women-led sit-ins, most notably at Shaheen Bagh. Digital platforms enabled rapid circulation of protest calls, legal information, and counter-narratives, while also amplifying women's leadership within the movement. These protests disrupted conventional images of political participation by foregrounding Muslim women, elderly women, and homemakers as central political actors. Such instances challenge the binary between "online" and "offline" participation, illustrating how digital platforms can complement and intensify traditional forms of political action. For many women, online engagement serves as a gateway to offline participation, lowering psychological and informational barriers to involvement. At the same time, offline mobilization reinforces the political significance of digital spaces by grounding online discourse in lived political action.

Overall, social media functions as a hybrid political space where information, identity, and action intersect. While not all digital engagement translates into sustained political participation, these platforms have expanded the repertoire of political action available to women in contemporary India.

5. Research Gaps

Gap 1: Limited research explores how women's online political engagement translates into offline actions such as voting, protests, or leadership in grassroots movements.

Gap 2: Few studies address the intersection of caste, class, religion, rural-urban location, and language in shaping women's access to and participation in digital political spaces.

Gap 3: There is insufficient analysis of platform-specific dynamics, including algorithms, content moderation, and design features, and how these influence women's political visibility and engagement.

Gap 4: The long-term impact of women-led digital campaigns on policy reforms, electoral outcomes, and institutional change in India remains underexplored.

Gap 5: Research on online harassment often overlooks how legal frameworks, platform governance, and institutional measures affect women's ability to participate safely in digital politics.

6. Research Problem and Rationale

6.1 Research Problem

Despite the rapid growth of social media use in India, women remain underrepresented in formal political institutions and often face structural, cultural, and digital barriers to meaningful political participation. While social media offers new avenues for expression, mobilization, and activism, there is limited understanding of how online engagement translates into tangible political action, such as voting, protest participation, or leadership in grassroots movements. Additionally, persistent challenges—such as gendered online harassment, algorithmic bias, disinformation, and the digital divide—create complex constraints that shape the effectiveness and inclusivity of women's political participation. This gap raises a critical question: How do Indian women navigate social media to assert political agency, and what factors enable or limit the transition from digital expression to offline political action?

6.2 Rationale

This study is important because it addresses a pressing gap in knowledge about the relationship between digital activism

and women's political empowerment in India. Understanding how social media facilitates or constrains women's political participation can inform strategies for digital literacy, platform governance, and policy interventions. The research also contributes to broader debates on mediated democracy, gendered participation, and the role of digital technologies in transforming political mobilization in the Global South. By focusing on both opportunities and barriers, the study provides insights into creating inclusive and safe digital political spaces that enhance women's agency and participation.

- Addresses the gap in understanding how social media influences women's political participation in India.
- Explores the transition from online engagement (hashtags, campaigns, digital advocacy) to offline political actions (voting, protests, grassroots leadership).
- Highlights structural and technological barriers, such as gendered online harassment, algorithmic bias, disinformation, and the digital divide, that affect women's political agency.
- Provides insights into strategies for digital literacy, safer online spaces, and inclusive platform governance to enhance women's political empowerment.
- Contributes to broader debates on mediated democracy, gendered participation, and the evolving role of digital technologies in political mobilization in the Global South.
- Supports evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and activists working toward gender-inclusive political participation.

By addressing these concerns, the research offers meaningful academic, social, and practical contributions to the field of mass communication and civic studies.

7. Research Objectives

- To examine how women in India use social media platforms (Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) to access political information and express political opinions.

- To analyze the role of digital campaigns, hashtags, and online activism in mobilizing women for political participation.

- To investigate the transition from online engagement to offline political actions, such as voting, protests, and grassroots leadership.

- To identify the structural, technological, and socio-cultural barriers—such as harassment, algorithmic bias, disinformation, and the digital divide—that limit women's political agency online.

- To explore strategies for enhancing media literacy, safe digital participation, and inclusive political engagement for women in India.

7.1 Research Questions

- How do women in India navigate social media to access political information and express their political views?

- What role do online campaigns, hashtags, and digital advocacy play in mobilizing women for political participation?

- How does online engagement translate into offline political participation, such as voting, protests, and leadership in grassroots movements?

- What structural, technological, and socio-cultural factors constrain women's political participation on digital platforms?

- What strategies or interventions can enhance women's safe and meaningful participation in online political spaces?

8. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates how social media mediates women's political participation in India, highlighting the interplay between opportunities, processes, and constraints. It draws on political communication theory, digital citizenship, feminist media theory, and networked feminism to analyze both the enabling and limiting factors of digital political engagement.

8.1. Key Components

1.1.1. Digital Platforms as Political Spaces

- Platforms: Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp
- Function: Provide access to political information, discussions, and digital campaigns
- Mechanism: Hashtags, viral campaigns, online advocacy

1.1.2. Women's Digital Political Engagement

- Activities: Political discussion, sharing experiences, digital activism
- Forms of Participation: Issue-based mobilization, consciousness-raising, political expression

1.1.3. Translation to Offline Political Participation

- Activities: Voting, protests, community organizing, leadership in grassroots movements
- Mechanism: Awareness, motivation, collective mobilization

1.1.4. Mediating Factors / Constraints

- Gendered online harassment and political violence
- Disinformation, algorithmic bias, and platform governance
- Digital divide: unequal access, literacy, language barriers
- Socio-cultural norms and intersectional inequalities

1.1.5. Outcomes

- Enhanced political awareness and efficacy
- Networked feminist mobilization
- Limited or contingent empowerment depending on structural and platform constraints

1.1.6. Description

This framework conceptualizes women's social media use as a mediated process, where digital engagement can facilitate political mobilization but is shaped by structural inequalities, platform architecture, and socio-cultural norms. Women's participation is positioned at the intersection of opportunity (platform affordances) and constraint (harassment, digital divide, algorithmic bias). The framework emphasizes the online-to-offline continuum, showing that digital activism may lead to tangible political actions, but outcomes are contingent upon digital literacy, safety, and inclusive governance.

9. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how social media facilitates women's political participation in contemporary India. Given the focus on understanding experiences, motivations, challenges, and contextual factors, qualitative methods provide the flexibility to capture rich, in-depth insights that cannot be measured through quantitative surveys alone.

9.1 Research Design

The study employs an exploratory, descriptive research design with a case study approach, allowing for detailed examination of specific social media campaigns and women-led digital activism. This design is appropriate for understanding:

- How women access and interpret political information online.
- The mechanisms through which online engagement translates into offline participation.
- The constraints and barriers that mediate women's political participation on digital platforms.

By combining multiple sources of qualitative data, the research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon rather than generalize across all populations.

10. Gendered Online Harassment: The "Silencing Effect"

The phenomenon of gendered harassment in India is not merely an incidental byproduct of digital discourse; it is a systemic tool of political exclusion. Research by Amnesty International India (2020) revealed that 1 in 7 tweets mentioning women politicians in India was "problematic" or "abusive." When broken down by identity, the statistics show a clear intersectional hostility: women from marginalized castes or religious minorities received 94% more abuse than their counterparts from dominant groups. This hostility manifests through "Gendertrolling," a coordinated practice where mobs use "shaming" tactics to push women out of the digital public sphere. In the Indian context, this often takes the form of *character assassination*, where a woman's political stance is delegitimized by questioning her "modesty" (*maryada*) or "sanskaar" (traditional values).

- The Chilling Effect: This creates a "spiral of silence." When a woman witnesses another being targeted with threats of sexual violence or doxxing (the leaking of private information like home addresses), she is statistically more likely to self-censor.

- Institutional Failure: The legal framework, primarily the Information Technology Act (2000) and sections of the BNS (formerly IPC), often proves inadequate. Police sensitivity toward "virtual" threats remains low, and the anonymity of the "troll farm" makes accountability nearly impossible.

10.1 Disinformation, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Bias

The architecture of Indian digital politics is heavily reliant on "dark social" channels—specifically WhatsApp. Unlike the open architecture of X (Twitter), WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption creates "information silos" where disinformation is shielded from fact-checkers.

- The "Moral Guardian" Trap: Disinformation campaigns in India frequently weaponize the trope of the *Bharatiya Nari* (the ideal Indian woman). Fake news stories often frame specific policies or candidates as threats to "family values"

or "religious sanctity," leveraging women's roles as primary caregivers to trigger emotional sharing.

• Algorithmic Masculinity: Platform algorithms are designed for "stickiness," prioritizing high-arousal emotions like anger and outrage. Because feminist discourse often requires nuance and historical context, it is structurally disadvantaged by algorithms that reward the "punchy," often aggressive rhetoric of patriarchal nationalism.

• State Surveillance: The use of sophisticated spyware and the tightening of intermediary guidelines have turned the smartphone from a tool of liberation into a potential "pocket informant." For women activists in regions like Chhattisgarh or during movements like the Anti-CAA protests, the fear of Pegasus-style surveillance has led to the adoption of "digital hiding"—communicating through ephemeral messaging or leaving platforms entirely, which diminishes their political visibility.

10.2. The Digital Divide and Intersectional Inequalities

While India has the world's second-largest internet user base, the "Gender Digital Divide" remains a significant barrier to substantive mobilization.

• The Gatekeeper Phenomenon: In many rural Indian households, the smartphone is a "shared asset," usually owned by the male head of the family. A woman's access to political content is often mediated or monitored by male relatives, preventing her from engaging in "subversive" or independent political exploration.

• Caste and Digital Capital: The "Hashtags to Ballots" transition is more seamless for Savarna (upper-caste) women who possess the linguistic capital (English proficiency) and social capital to navigate digital platforms. Conversely, Dalit and Adivasi women face double-marginalization; they are targeted by both gendered and casteist slurs (e.g., the weaponization of the "quota" debate), making the digital public sphere a site of trauma rather than empowerment.

• Linguistic Exclusion: The "English-Hindi" duopoly of platform interfaces ignores the political agency of the "Vernacular Web." Women communicating in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, or Marathi often find that platform safety tools and moderation bots are less effective in their languages, leaving them more exposed to unmoderated abuse.

10.3. Discussion: Reconfiguring Women's Political Agency

The transition from digital engagement to institutionalized political power in India is not a linear progression but a complex reconfiguration of agency. As this research demonstrates, the "digital public sphere" is not merely a reflection of offline politics but an active site where the rules of engagement are being rewritten.

10.4 The Hybridity of Participation

The analysis reveals that women's political agency in contemporary India has become hybridized. Participation no longer follows the binary of "online" vs. "offline." Instead, it exists in a fluid continuum where a WhatsApp message can trigger a village council (*Gram Sabha*) intervention, and an Instagram Live session can serve as a political manifesto for a first-time female candidate. This hybridity allows women to bypass traditional patriarchal "gatekeepers"—such as local party bosses or conservative family heads—who have historically controlled the flow of political information.

10.4 The Paradox of Visibility

A central theme in this study is the paradox of digital visibility. While platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook provide women with unprecedented visibility, this very visibility often becomes a "trap" that triggers gendered surveillance and harassment (as discussed in Section 6.1).

• Selective Visibility: We observe that women often engage in "tactical visibility"—choosing when to be visible on public platforms and when to retreat into the "dark social" safety of encrypted WhatsApp groups.

• Subaltern Counter-publics: For women from marginalized caste (Dalit/Adivasi) or religious backgrounds, social media has enabled the creation of what Nancy Fraser calls "counter-publics." These are digital spaces where they can formulate their own political discourse away from the dominant, often upper-caste-male-centric, mainstream media narrative.

10.5 Beyond "Clicktivism": The Move to the Ballot

Critiques of digital activism often dismiss it as "slacktivism" or "clicktivism." However, in the Indian context, the data suggests otherwise. The surge in female voter turnout in the 2019 and 2024 General Elections indicates that digital political expression is a precursor to electoral action.

• Information as Empowerment: By accessing "unfiltered" political data—ranging from candidate criminal records to rights-based entitlements—women are entering the polling booth with higher levels of "political efficacy" (the belief that their vote matters).

• Collective Action: Movements like #*PinjraTod* and #*GirlsAtDhabas* prove that digital hashtags are often the "spark" that leads to the physical occupation of public spaces, ultimately forcing policy changes in urban safety and campus regulations.

10.6 Structural Contingencies

Ultimately, the paper argues that digital agency is contingent upon structural support. A hashtag cannot replace the need for institutional safeguards. The "democratic potential" of social media is limited by three critical factors:

11. Conclusion: The Future of Digitally Mediated Agency

This research has navigated the complex terrain of India's digital transformation, arguing that the journey from "hashtags to ballots" represents a fundamental shift in the architecture of democratic engagement. By analyzing the mobilization of women through social media, we move beyond the simplistic view of technology as a neutral tool,

instead viewing it as a contested site of power, identity, and resistance.

11. 1 Synthesis of Findings

The primary contribution of this paper is the identification of social media as a "liminal political space" for Indian women—a gateway that bridges the gap between private domesticity and public political life.

- The Enabling Power: We have shown that platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have lowered the "transaction costs" of political mobilization. For the first time in Indian history, a woman in a rural district can bypass local patriarchal hierarchies to access a direct line of communication with national leaders or global feminist movements.

- The Constraining Reality: However, this empowerment is balanced by the persistent "dark side" of the digital sphere. As detailed in Section 6, the digital public sphere is not immune to the traditional pathologies of Indian politics; rather, it often amplifies gendered harassment, caste-based exclusion, and state surveillance. The "algorithmic masculinity" of these platforms often rewards polarization over the nuanced, rights-based discourse necessary for gender justice.

11.2 Policy and Institutional Imperatives

For the "digital rehearsal" of political agency to result in long-term institutional change, the paper argues that connectivity must be accompanied by Digital Justice. The following interventions are paramount:

- Critical Media Literacy: Moving beyond functional literacy to empower women to decode disinformation and navigate algorithmic biases.

- Legislative and Platform Accountability: There is an urgent need for the Indian state and platform intermediaries to move from a reactive to a proactive stance in addressing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV).

- Intersectionality in Design: Technological solutions and digital resources must be designed with an intersectional lens,

ensuring that Dalit, Adivasi, and rural women are not further marginalized by linguistic or economic barriers.

11.3 A Research Agenda for the Future

As we look toward the next decade of Indian democracy, the relationship between digital engagement and policy outcomes remains a fertile ground for inquiry. Future research should prioritize:

- Longitudinal Impact: How does digital engagement in one election cycle affect long-term female political leadership and party recruitment?
- Comparative Vernacular Studies: Investigating how mobilization patterns differ across India's linguistically diverse "Vernacular Webs."
- The Impact of AI: Examining how generative AI and deepfakes specifically target women's political credibility in the Indian context.

In finality, while the hashtag is a potent tool for visibility, it is the ballot that remains the ultimate instrument of change. The "digital citizenship" explored in this paper suggests that Indian women are no longer just passive subjects of political discourse; they are active architects of a new, mediated democratic future.

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Evolving Technologies in Media: A Study on Transformative Trends In Sports Broadcasting from Television to Digital Media

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Abstract

The world of sports broadcasting has undergone a seismic shift in the past 30 years from a TV-based model to a complex, digital-first universe. This paper explores the transformative trends of media brought about by the evolution of technology, with a focus on sports broadcasting. It traces the evolution of linear television from its takeover by satellite and cable, through the age of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, high-speed connectivity, and immersive technologies. Key technological drivers analysed include 5G networks, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven personalisation, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), cloud-based production and data visualisation. The study also looks at the evolving consumption behaviours of audiences, particularly the generational shift towards second-screen experiences, interactivity and on-demand content. Using a qualitative meta-analysis of industry reports, academic literature and case studies (e.g. English Premier League, NBA, Olympics), the paper argues that the linear broadcast model is being replaced by a hybrid, personalised and data-rich engagement framework. But there are still big challenges like the digital divide, latency, and the fragmentation of rights. The conclusion is that future sports broadcasting will not be determined by any one technology but by the confluence of AI, 5G and immersive media, and that the role of the 'broadcaster' needs to be re-imagined as a 'digital experience curator'.

Keywords: sports broadcasting, digital transformation, OTT platforms, 5G technology, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, second-screen viewing, media convergence

1. Introduction

For much of the 20th century, sports broadcasting meant terrestrial and cable television. The sports leagues and broadcast networks formed a symbiotic relationship, live events drawing mass audiences and advertising revenue, and became a cornerstone of media economics. But the internet came along and then the explosion of smartphones and high-bandwidth connectivity really blew that model up. Today's sports consumption is no longer tied to the living room TV set; it is omnipresent, interactive and increasingly personalised.

This paper investigates the following research questions:

(1) What are the key technological innovations that have catalysed the shift from traditional television to digital media in sports broadcasting?

(2) How have these technologies altered audience engagement and production practices?

(3) What are the emerging challenges and future trajectories of this transformation?

This study aims to provide a holistic view of the technological evolution of sports media by synthesising existing scholarship and industry evidence. It covers only the period between the mid-1990s and 2025 and deals with major Western and global sporting events, making contextual references to the Indian broadcasting scenario wherever necessary.

2. Historical Context: The Television Era

Before we get into digital disruption, it's worth acknowledging the accomplishments of classic sports broadcasting. Television has made local sporting events into national spectacles. Innovations such as instant replay, which began in the 1960s, slow motion, and graphics overlays have helped viewers

understand and enjoy the experience. The broadcast model depended on a linear schedule: viewers gathered at specific times to watch events chosen by network producers. While this model has provided stability and mass reach, it also had its own inherent limitations: no choice; little interactivity; passive consumption.

The advent of satellite and cable television in the 1980s and 1990s started to chip away at the monopoly of the terrestrial networks. Dedicated sports channels (ESPN, Sky Sports, etc.) provided a 24/7 content schedule, and pay-per-view and subscription models created new revenue streams. But the core delivery system was still linear television. The real turning point was broadband internet and the emergence of digital platforms.

3. Television Era of Sports Broadcasting

Before digital convergence, sports broadcasting was essentially structured along the lines of linear television. Broadcasters arranged events for large simultaneous audiences and viewers consumed sport primarily through fixed domestic screens at set times. The model generated enormous cultural power for television networks, which acted as gatekeepers of visibility, sponsorship and national sporting narratives. The television age also standardised many conventions that are still central to sports media today, like live commentary, multi-camera production, instant replay, graphics packages and event-based advertising. But its disadvantages were as glaring. There was little audience participation, almost no personalization and viewers had little control over when and how they consumed sports content. Access was largely by geography, by broadcast rights and schedule availability than by user preference.

Traditional television has laid the economic foundation for modern sport through rights deals, sponsorship visibility and mass reach. The importance of the current shift can therefore only be understood by examining how profoundly

the television model influenced the previous sports media economy.

4. Shift to Digital Platforms

Shift to Digital Platforms. One of the most evident changes in sports broadcasting is the rise of over-the-top and platform-based delivery. OTT means content is streamed over the internet without necessarily the use of conventional cable or satellite packages, and so gives audiences the opportunity to receive content directly through smart devices such as TV's, computers, tablet and smart phones. This gives Broadcasters not only the role of channel providers but cross platform content owners. Streaming platforms have come to prominence as Sports Broadcasters have had to provide sports broadcasts in more ways that just over a TV. According to WIPO, on-demand rights, digital streaming rights, and mobile rights have all become integral to modern sport media arrangements which implies a shift in delivery channels. Research has also indicated that sport streaming services provide a broad scope for a variety of different means for league and organisation to gain revenue. These include league driven apps, broadcast streaming, and platform native broadcasting. This shift to a digital platform has two major implications; first media is increasingly individualized rather than household oriented, and second control of data streams, consumer relationships and interface development is as important as the content itself. This means sports broadcasting is evolving from a purely transmission-based model to a platform-based model focused on retaining, involving and managing customers. Audience Behavior and Participation. One of the biggest implications that the digital turn is that the nature of the spectator has altered; sports audiences are no longer merely spectators watching a sports broadcast on TV, rather they are active participants that look for highlights, follow live scores, participate in sports chat rooms and switches from device to device whilst sports broadcast is being shown. Therefore, the act of sports viewing is no longer reception but participation.

The use of second devices is especially influential as one has reported that almost all of the observers of a football game watched in front of the television while using a second device. Furthermore, they also argue that the viewing of a sports event triggers different second screen actions compared to the viewing of other TV content. A study of millennial sports spectators indicates that the use of a second device is the result of seeking for entertainment, ease of use, and additional data compared to what is offered on television. This implies a user expectation for the viewing of a sports event as a layered broadcast with added data, commentary, images, chats and updates. Mobile and Internet access also reduces restriction on time and place. One study found that the viewing of sports broadcasts by consumers across a variety of platforms suggests that mobile devices have broadened flexibility for audiences to access sport content wherever they are. This ease of access can account for younger audiences being more comfortable with digital means rather than broadcast only viewing. Social Media Integration. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Youtube, Instagram etc have become a fundamental accompaniment to Sports Broadcasting. The social environment that these platforms provide helps broadcast the news and analysis from sports events which essentially allows live sports to become a digital discussion. As a result, sport viewing now has an extended life post-match, creating opportunities for fans to engage with their favorite teams and for brand building.

However, this causes tension for sports broadcasters as they also own a lot of exclusive content which people can easily distribute on social media. Research from a digital platform has demonstrated that organisations utilize a combination of broadcast TV, streaming and social networks to broaden reach and revenue and that to effectively use the new means of viewing sports audiences now require effective data usage rights and coordination of the media platform. One consequence is a combined live broadcast of the match, alongside highlight dissemination and social

interactions with online observers. Sport is now not simply watched on broadcast but also shared and discussed in a constant cycle. Artificial intelligence in Sports Broadcasting. Artificial Intelligence is slowly shaping two key parts of sport broadcasting, production and audience.

For broadcasters it can be used to help automate the sports broadcast by detecting relevant information, such as objects or the right moment to provide a clip, or also used for data generation and optimization. For audiences it can help with the use of recommendation services and providing personalised news updates. Research into AI in sports broadcasting demonstrates that the use of machine learning, computer vision and natural language processing can greatly assist sports video broadcasters to make viewing of sports even better and to streamline the production process, which can be a time consuming and complicated job. This can also include a reduction in repetitive tasks and to process a greater amount of data at a quicker rate. The increasing use of AI can also be worrying as its full automation can lessen human decision and bias. Algorithmic user recommendations also result in fragmented views in which the audience will always see information that will most likely capture their attention. Ethics of Sports Broadcasting will have to contend with the use of AI, making sure that human decision and context accuracy remain as important.

5. The Digital Disruption: OTT and Streaming

The most visually obvious revolution in sports broadcasting has been the rise of over-the-top (OTT) platforms. Services like Amazon Prime Video, DAZN, ESPN+, and later Apple TV+ and Paramount+ have been outbidding traditional broadcasters to secure sports rights. Unencumbered by the infrastructure of traditional linear television, OTT platforms are built on cloud native architectures, allowing a host of interactive features impossible in the traditional setup. Firstly, multi-angle viewing allows users to switch, on the fly, between various camera feeds (e.g., from a tactical viewpoint

to an action shot centered around the star player or even a focus on the goalkeeper). Secondly, features like start-over and catch-up allow viewers to break free of the broadcast schedule. Thirdly, AI-driven personalized highlight packages cater to individual interests. A fan interested in scoring goals can receive a five-minute digest, while a tactically minded observer can access full possession sequences. One of the most obvious examples is the sale of rights to broadcast the English Premier League (EPL) matches to Amazon Prime in the UK (from 2019 onward). The Amazon broadcasts included live match statistics, ability to pause and rewind, and seamless integration with e-commerce features. Similarly, a feature in NBA League Pass allows the user to select home and away commentary feeds or simply arena audio or to track individual players. What we see is a move from broadcasting as a 'one-to-many' service to a personalized 'one-to-one' offering. Of course the move has not been entirely smooth. The latency issue in OTT feeds (generally 30-60 seconds behind live action) can make for an annoying viewer experience for those who are engaging in social media conversations during a match where spoilers can spread rapidly. The fragmentation of rights, where the rights for a single league are held by different broadcasters (e.g. ESPN+ and DAZN holding rights for different leagues, or the use of different platforms such as Disney+ Hotstar, Sony LIV, and Viacom18 for the same league in different geographies, like India), has proven frustrating and led to viewer fatigue and over-subscription.

6. Immersive Technologies: AR, VR and 360-Degree Video

But streaming isn't the only technology changing how we watch sport. Immersive technologies offer fundamentally different viewing experiences. Augmented reality (AR) is a technology that overlays digital information on to the real world, allowing for sophisticated additions on top of the live broadcast. In cricket, the ball trajectory "hawk-eye" feature is an AR tool; in American football the first-down line.

The use of AR for deeper tactical analysis is more recent: a former player might walk through a 3D reconstruction of a goal-scoring play, explaining movements in 3D space. Virtual Reality (VR) promises to do the same but without the underlying real-world picture,placing the viewer on the field or in the stands. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is already experimenting with VR broadcasts of events, allowing users wearing a VR headset to 'be' in the action at the 2018 PyeongChang or 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (court side, poolside, etc.). VR technology has suffered so far due to its costs and the user's experience, but advances in lightweight headsets and 5G technology promise to reduce lag and enhance usability. Companies such as NextVR (now owned by Apple) have already demonstrated impressive VR broadcasts of live boxing and basketball. 360-degree video provides a less immersive but still innovative viewer experience. Distributed through platforms like YouTube or Facebook, users can navigate the stadium in a virtual space with their mouse or their smartphone. Formula 1 has experimented with placing cameras at various points in the car and in and around the circuit allowing for an entirely new way to watch the sport. Ultimately, these technologies suggest a future in which the spectator will be given a far greater level of control not only of what they watch, but where they watch from-moving from viewing to presence.

7. Artificial Intelligence and Data Driven Broadcasting

AI may be the most ubiquitous yet invisible technology revolutionizing sports broadcasting, operating at three levels; production, distribution and engagement. At production level, AI powered automated cameras are now capable of tracking a ball or player across a field without the need for human operators. Startups like Pixellot offer 'automated production' for lower-tier sports events at a fraction of the usual cost; AI determines how the cameras move, cutting between different shots and creating highlights automatically. At the higher end, AI can assist a human director by flagging

significant events in one of many feeds, such as a near miss or a foul, or an outpouring of emotion from the crowd. At the distribution level, AI is able to drive personalization. The ESPN application, for example, uses machine learning to reorder sport highlights based on a user's past viewership, team affiliations, and even the time of day. This algorithmic curation extends to push notifications; a fan of a particular club might receive a notification as soon as their team scores. At the engagement level, AI delivers the real-time data fans have become accustomed to expecting; Expected Goals (xG) in football, player heat maps in tennis, shot percentages in basketball are all computed by AI based on a wealth of historical data. Natural Language Generation (NLG) technology, such as that provided by Automated Insights' Wordsmith, can also automatically generate match reports, team news or fantasy sport data feeds. For broadcasters, this data rich environment allows commentators to go beyond mere description, and become data storytellers.

8. 5G and Cloud Production: The Infrastructure Revolution

The technological shifts detailed above would simply not be possible without developments in network and production infrastructure. The low latency, high bandwidth, high device density required for mobile VR, live AR overlay or even just continuous multi-angle streaming is provided by 5G. Trials already exist where 'camera drones' streamed live 4K at live events like the Super Bowl and UEFA Champions League final with just 5G connectivity, eliminating need for expensive cables. As crucial is the shift to cloud production. Until recently all sports broadcasts were produced by OB (Outside Broadcast) trucks-effectively trucks filled with studio equipment such as switchers, encoders and storage systems-to broadcast events. Now cameras feed directly to the cloud and software-defined tools perform switching, add graphics and encode feeds. This 'produce-from-anywhere' model costs less and scales more effectively, enabling small production teams to remotely broadcast several events simultaneously. It proved to be indispensable during COVID-19 to enable professional sports broadcasts with limited staff on-site.

9. Audience Behavior and the 'Second Screen' Phenomenon

A discussion of media transformation would not be complete without addressing audience behaviour. The proliferation of smart-phones and tablets has seen a rise in what is termed the 'second screen', whereby spectators continue to watch broadcasts on their television sets, while also accessing live stats, fantasy sports applications or social networks on their second screens. Broadcasters have responded to this trend by designing 'social TV' experiences, such as live polls, integrated twitter feeds and viewing parties. The differences by generation are marked; both Gen Z and younger millennials have less patience for the traditional linear narrative or advertising breaks and prefer to engage with clips, highlights, and short-form video content, such as those found on TikTok and Instagram Reels, and increasingly more interactive elements. This trend has led to sports leagues, such as the NBA, developing 'direct-to-consumer' (DTC) applications that bypass broadcasters altogether, enabling direct access to content; the NBA's app allows live streaming of matches, but is also filled with vertical video highlights, behind-the-scenes content and mobile-first gamification. However, concerns remain over the 'passive majority' and how these digital shifts are making younger viewers' engagement increasingly interactive, and alienating an older viewership who struggle with multi-platform navigation and the immediacy of the digital age. Today, many sports broadcasters adopt a hybrid model with a linear TV offering, catering for the passive majority, as well as a premium digital offering aimed at the engaged viewer. Future Directions Challenges and Criticisms The continued process has challenges to overcome. Digital divides by geography, age, social class etc are the first challenge. Quality live streaming depends on a fibre or 5G connection which remains patchy, even in the most developed countries, where TV can still be the only accessible platform for people in remote rural or developing economies. Secondly, latency and synchronization issues degrade 'liveness', the ultimate hallmark of sports broadcasts. If a neighbour watching the TV broadcast cheers a goal 5 seconds before the streamer

witnesses it, their experience is diminished. While solutions such as low-latency CMAF are beginning to emerge, full implementation will be slow. Thirdly, fragmented rights result in a poor user experience, with fans potentially needing subscriptions to up to four services to watch a single team across the various domestic and international competitions that team may participate in. This complexity risk further encourages more viewer piracy which already exists in most countries. Fourthly, the implications on labor are a major concern. Higher automated production could result in a loss of jobs to camera operators and junior editors. Potential ethical dilemmas where AI can foster a 'filter bubble' for sports fans and expose them only to sports, teams or perspectives they already are exposed to.

10. Trajectories for 2030

Predicting the future remains complex, but some trends are clear for 2030: 'metaverse-adjacent' experiences, where users can spectate live events in the guise of avatars, meet others in virtual replicas of stadiums and buy virtual merchandise (NFTs) that unlock real-life perks; tactile internet, which would enable fans to 'feel' a cricket ball being hit, for example, through a wearable device; and generative AI will take a larger role in producing highlight reels and multilingual commentary on live events. The real likely outcome is not that TV will disappear altogether, but will evolve into a more hybrid proposition where linear broadcast content acts as an 'anchor' for key events, and digital platforms enhance fan engagement, offering both depth and choice. The future role of sports broadcasters will shift from being merely a 'signal distributor' to being a 'digital experience curator', blending data, video, social interactivity and personalisation seamlessly.

11. Conclusion:

This discussion has traced the development of sports broadcasting from the television era to the current digital era, examining the key technological influences: OTT streaming, AR/VR, AI personalization, 5G and cloud production. These

forces are clearly demonstrating a shift in consumption from the traditional passive, linear viewer to an active, interactive and multi-platform audience. Traditional broadcasters are not obsolete, but must evolve by embracing data-driven production and direct-to-consumer relationships. While there are concerns about the development of the digital divides, latency, rights fragmentation and the implications for the workforce, these are not insurmountable. All in all, the evolution of sports broadcasting is representative of trends occurring across media, which see the consumer develop from being purely passive recipients to having an active stake. Sports broadcasting is destined to be taken over by those that can utilize technology to not merely show sport but to engulf the spectator in sport.

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The Evolution of Queer Subjectivity in Bengali Cinema from Rituparno Ghosh to the Ott Era

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1. Introduction

Bengali cinema, informed by a deep legacy of literary humanism, political engagement, and formal experimentation, provides a rich cultural space for examining the articulation of queer subjectivity. Yet for much of its cinematic history, queer lives remained largely invisible or indirectly expressed. Rather than being openly represented, non-normative desires were frequently displaced into metaphor, suggestion, and subtext. This absence was not simply an aesthetic decision but a consequence of entrenched social taboos, legal restrictions, and dominant heteronormative ideologies that rendered queer identities socially unrecognized. As a result, early Bengali films often relied on ambiguity—portraying intense same-sex emotional bonds, cross-gender performances, or figures marked as unconventional or "other"—to gesture toward queerness without explicitly naming it.

Queer theory, with its emphasis on identity as fluid, performative, and contingent, offers a productive framework for interpreting these early cinematic strategies. Instead of presenting stable or self-declared queer identities, such films allowed gender variance and desire to emerge through gestures, emotional intensity, and interpersonal relationships. These moments subtly unsettled normative assumptions about sexuality and gender, even as they stopped short of overt affirmation. In this sense, Bengali cinema reflected a broader cultural contradiction: a history of intellectual openness shaped by the Bengal Renaissance, leftist political

thought, and progressive artistic traditions, coexisting with a conservative moral order that strictly regulated sexuality, family, and social respectability.

From the late twentieth century onward, particularly under the influence of global queer movements, feminist film theory, and postcolonial critique, Bengali cinema began to address queer lives with greater directness and clarity. Independent and parallel cinema proved especially significant in this transformation, offering alternative spaces for storytelling that foregrounded same-sex desire, gender nonconformity, and the everyday realities of queer individuals within Bengali society. These narratives moved beyond symbolic or coded representations, engaging queerness as a lived, embodied experience marked by intimacy, isolation, violence, solidarity, and self-recognition. Significantly, contemporary representations often locate queer subjectivity within concrete social environments—middle-class households, anonymous urban settings, or cultural sites such as literature, theatre, and political activism. Queerness is no longer framed exclusively as transgressive or tragic but is portrayed as relational, evolving, and shaped by intersecting factors such as class, language, geography, and historical memory. This shift resonates with queer theory's critique of universalized identity categories and its insistence on context-specific, intersectional understandings of desire and selfhood.

As a widely consumed public medium, cinema does more than mirror social change; it actively intervenes in the production of cultural meaning. The increasing visibility of queer narratives in Bengali cinema disrupts the presumed naturalness of heterosexuality and expands the range of possible identifications available to audiences. By expressing queer lives through idioms deeply rooted in Bengali cultural sensibilities, these films participate in a broader reimagining of identity—not as a stable essence, but as fluid, negotiated, and continually in the process of becoming.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, combining textual analysis, historical contextualization, and audience reception studies to trace the evolution of queer subjectivity in Bengali cinema. The methodology is structured as follows:

2.1. Film Text Analysis

Primary data consists of selected Bengali films that span the trajectory from Rituparno Ghosh's early works (Dahan, 1997; Asukh, 1999) to his explicitly queer films (ArektiPremer Golpo, 2010; Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish, 2012), post-Ghosh films (Nagarkirtan, 2019), and contemporary OTT productions (Amra 2GayTher, 2021). Each film is analyzed for:

- Narrative structures: Plot, character arcs, and storytelling techniques that foreground queer subjectivity.
- Visual and performative elements: Mise-en-scène, costume, body language, and cinematic framing, particularly how gender and desire are performed and represented.
- Dialogues and subtext: Language, silence, and coded cues used to signify non-normative sexualities.

2.2. Historical and Cultural Contextualization

Secondary sources including scholarly articles, newspaper reports, interviews, and archival material provide context for the socio-political and cultural conditions under which these films were made and received. This includes:

- Censorship and societal norms: How legal and moral frameworks shaped representations of gender and sexuality.
- Cultural influences: Adaptations of literature (e.g., Tagore's Chitrngada), theatre traditions, and regional aesthetic sensibilities.

2.3. Theoretical Framework Application

The analysis of queer subjectivity in Bengali cinema is guided primarily by Queer Theory (Butler, 1990) and Sexual Scripting Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which together provide a robust lens for understanding how films construct, perform, and negotiate gender and desire.

2.4. Queer Theory: Gender Performativity and Identity Construction

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity challenges the idea of gender as a fixed, innate characteristic. Instead, gender is seen as a series of repeated acts, gestures, and performances that produce the appearance of a coherent identity. Applying this framework to Bengali cinema allows us to understand characters not as inherently male, female, or transgender, but as embodying gender through socially mediated performances.

For example, in ArektiPremer Golpo (2010), Abhiroop Sen's transgender identity is expressed through bodily gestures, speech, costume, and interaction with others. These performances highlight how gender is socially negotiated, constantly reshaped by external norms and internal desire. Similarly, in Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012), dance becomes a medium through which gender and desire are performed and experienced. By reading these films through a Butlerian lens, we can see how cinema not only represents queer identities but also actively constructs them as lived, performative realities. Queer Theory also encourages a critical interrogation of social norms and binary thinking. Early films, such as Dahan (1997), may not depict explicit queer characters, but subtextual elements—such as emotional intimacy outside heteronormative frameworks or acts of bodily defiance—can be interpreted as preliminary gestures toward queer performativity. These films reveal how cinematic narratives negotiate the tension between societal regulation and individual identity.

2.5. Sexual Scripting Theory: Cultural, Interpersonal, and Intrapsychic Dimensions of Desire

Simon & Gagnon's sexual scripting theory complements Queer Theory by emphasizing that desire is not simply biological, but shaped by cultural expectations, interpersonal relationships, and internalized norms. In the Bengali context, where family, caste, and community exert strong influence, sexual scripting provides a way to understand how characters navigate love, intimacy, and social constraints.

2.6. For instance:

- In Nagarkirtan (2019), Puti's desires and romantic engagement with Madhu are mediated not only by personal attraction but also by societal norms around gender, caste, and social acceptance. Sexual scripting theory helps explain how these films represent desire as a culturally constructed, socially negotiated phenomenon, rather than a purely personal or biological impulse.

- In OTT narratives such as Amra 2GayTher, the protagonists' relationship is constantly shaped by family expectations, societal stigma, and internalized feelings of shame or fear, highlighting the interplay between intrapsychic processes and cultural norms in queer desire.

By combining Queer Theory and Sexual Scripting Theory, we can view Bengali films as multi-layered texts:

1. Cultural texts that reflect and critique societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

2. Sites of identity negotiation, where characters' performances, interactions, and emotional lives enact queer subjectivity.

2.7. Multi-Layered Interpretation

Together, these frameworks allow for an interpretation of Bengali cinema that captures:

- The performative and embodied nature of gender: Characters create and sustain identity through gestures, speech, and social interaction.

- The socially mediated nature of desire: Romantic and sexual feelings are shaped by external pressures, internal negotiations, and interpersonal dynamics.

- The evolution of queer representation over time: From implicit, coded subtext in films like Dahan to explicit, intersectional narratives in post-Ghosh cinema and OTT series.

- Cinema as a transformative medium: Films do not simply reflect reality but actively produce cultural understanding of queer lives, challenge heteronormative norms, and open spaces for empathy and dialogue.

2.8. Audience Reception Analysis

Where available, the study incorporates audience and critical responses, particularly for OTT content, to understand:

1. Reception patterns of queer narratives in theatrical versus digital contexts.

2. Societal impact and discourse generated by the visibility of LGBTQIA+ characters.

2.9. Limitations

- Focus is limited to Bengali-language cinema; findings may not generalize to Indian cinema at large.

- Due to the scarcity of academic studies on early queer cinema in Bengal, some interpretive analysis relies on visual and textual inference, supplemented by media reports and interviews.

- This methodology allows for a holistic understanding of queer subjectivity, tracing its evolution from coded, subtextual representation to explicit, nuanced narratives in contemporary Bengali cinema and OTT content.

2.10. Content Analysis

This content analysis examines how queer subjectivity is constructed, represented, and transformed in Bengali cinema across different historical moments and media platforms.

Rather than focusing solely on individual films, the analysis identifies recurring representational patterns, thematic shifts, and narrative strategies that collectively shape the cinematic articulation of queerness. Drawing on qualitative coding of narrative, visual, and performative elements, the analysis is organized around four key dimensions: modes of representation, gender performance, social context, and narrative outcomes.

3. Historical Background: Coded Queerness in Bengali Cinema

Before the emergence of explicitly queer narratives, Bengali cinema often encoded same-sex desire, gender ambiguity, or non-normative identities through subtle narrative and visual cues. These representations were rarely explicit due to strict censorship laws, social conservatism, and the potential for public backlash. Instead, filmmakers relied on metaphor, suggestion, and emotional subtext to hint at queer desire.

Early Bengali films frequently utilized cross-dressing, close male friendships, or intense emotional intimacy between same-sex characters as ways to signal non-normative desire without overtly naming it. For instance, in Ritwik Ghatak's films from the 1950s and 1960s, male bonding is depicted with lingering looks, physical closeness, or emotional dependence, which contemporary critics have read as subtle queer subtext. Similarly, adaptations of Bengali literature often preserved ambiguous portrayals of desire, translating complex emotional landscapes into cinematic codes that could bypass censorship. Moreover, the use of melodramatic storytelling, symbolic imagery, and mise-en-scène allowed filmmakers to explore queer themes indirectly. Scenes depicting confinement, marginalization, or unrequited desire often doubled as metaphors for societal oppression of non-normative sexualities. This "coded queerness" created a space where audiences familiar with queer experience could recognize hidden meanings, while mainstream audiences remained unaware or only partially aware. The historical reliance on subtext highlights a tension in Bengali cinema:

while there was a rich tradition of emotional depth and experimental aesthetics, direct representation of queer identities was socially and legally constrained. This set the stage for the eventual emergence of films in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that could engage more openly with queer subjectivity, reflecting broader cultural shifts in India's engagement with sexuality, identity, and human rights.

3.1. Early Work of Rituparno Ghosh: Dahan and Asukh

- Dahan (1997)

Dahan (1997) is based on a novel by Suchitra Bhattacharya and dramatizes the aftermath of a sexual assault witnessed by a middle-class woman. While not explicitly queer, the film demonstrates Ghosh's concern with social hierarchies, gendered vulnerability, and identity under constraint, themes that prefigure his later queer narratives. Dahan explores moral judgment, societal policing of bodies, and female solidarity, which resonate with later examinations of marginalized subjectivities, including queer lives.

Ghosh's early aesthetic choices — close focus on emotional subtleties, layered performances, and interrogation of societal norms — establish the groundwork for his exploration of non-normative desires. By portraying the consequences of societal surveillance and moral policing, Dahan indirectly engages with the broader discourse of bodily autonomy, which becomes central in his later queer narratives.

- Asukh (1999)

In Asukh, Ghosh examines personal loss, emotional alienation, and professional entrapment through a woman's experience in the medical profession. The film foregrounds psychological interiority and the societal pressures that shape identity, offering early insight into the social frameworks that govern desire and agency. While heterosexual relationships dominate the plot, the focus on marginalized emotional experiences lays a foundation for the empathetic and nuanced portrayal of queer characters in subsequent works.

3.2. Ghosh's Explicit Queer Cinema

- ArektiPremer Golpo (2010)

ArektiPremer Golpo ("Just Another Love Story") is directed by Kaushik Ganguly and features Rituparno Ghosh in the role of Abhiroop Sen, a transgender filmmaker. The film is notable for its dual narrative structure:

- Contemporary narrative: Follows Abhiroop's life, highlighting the social and personal challenges faced by a transgender person in contemporary Kolkata. The story explores themes such as family rejection, societal stigma, and the struggle for romantic and sexual fulfillment, emphasizing how identity is negotiated in everyday life.

- Historical narrative: Interweaves Abhiroop's story with that of Chapal Bhaduri, a jatra theatre performer famous for playing female roles. This historical layer connects present-day queer experiences to a long-standing cultural tradition of gender non-conformity in Bengal, showing that gender fluidity has been part of the cultural fabric even when not publicly acknowledged.

The film explicitly foregrounds queer subjectivity, moving away from coded or metaphorical portrayals that dominated earlier Bengali cinema. Ghosh's performance, along with the film's narrative strategies, emphasizes gender performativity (Butler, 1990), illustrating how gender is enacted through clothing, gestures, and social interaction rather than being biologically fixed. By centering the transgender experience and portraying desire as legitimate and complex, the film challenges audiences to reconsider normative understandings of gender and sexuality.

Significance:

- Marks a transition from subtextual queerness to explicit queer storytelling.

- Links contemporary identity struggles to historical traditions of gender non-conformity.

- Uses cinematic form to make gender performance visible and legible to audiences.

- Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012)

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish is Ghosh's own directorial and acting project, inspired by Tagore's dance-drama Chitra. The film centers on Ritika, a choreographer grappling with gender identity, societal expectations, and personal desire.

Key elements:

- The film emphasizes how Ritika negotiates her body and identity within professional and social spaces, aligning with Butlerian notions of gender as performative. Each dance, gesture, and costume choice is a performance of gender, illustrating the fluidity of identity.

- Unlike traditional narratives where queer desire is coded or marginalized, the film situates the protagonist's emotional and sexual desires at the narrative center.

- Ritika faces challenges such as misunderstanding, judgment, and professional pressure, reflecting how societal norms regulate bodies and gender expression.

Significance:

- Uses dance and performance as both a literal and metaphorical space for exploring gender and desire.

- Highlights the embodied experience of queer subjectivity, showing how internal identity and external societal expectations interact.

- Continues Ghosh's project of bringing queer lives into explicit visibility while rooting them in Bengali cultural and literary traditions.

3.3. Post-Ghosh Cinema: Expanded Narratives

- Nagarkirtan (2019)

Directed by Kaushik Ganguly, Nagarkirtan tells the story of Puti, a transgender woman, and Madhu, a cisgender man who falls in love with her.

• The film explores not only gender and sexuality but also class, caste, and social marginalization, showing how multiple axes of identity shape lived experiences.

• Societal violence and marginalization: Puti faces harassment, discrimination, and familial rejection, reflecting real-world challenges faced by transgender communities in India.

• Emotional depth and humanity: The romance is portrayed with sensitivity and realism, presenting queer desire as legitimate, complex, and deeply human.

Significance:

• Achieved critical and commercial acclaim, signaling increased acceptance of nuanced queer narratives in Bengali cinema.

• Demonstrates how post-Ghosh cinema continues to foreground marginalized experiences while expanding narrative scope beyond individual identity to social structures.

3.4. Broader Trends in Post-Ghosh Cinema

Following Ghosh's interventions, several Bengali films and web series have attempted to depict queer lives more openly:

• Grihapravesh (2025) and Koyekti Meyer Golpo experiment with queer themes but have faced criticism for stereotyping or tokenistic portrayals, showing that while visibility has increased, narrative sophistication is uneven.

• OTT platforms, including Hoichoi and independent web series, are expanding the representational possibilities, enabling stories about LGBTQIA+ relationships, family conflicts, and personal identity to reach wider audiences.

• These works collectively indicate a shift from coded or metaphorical queer representation to explicit, socially engaged storytelling, though challenges in authenticity and nuance remain.

3.5. The OTT Era: Digital Spaces for Queer Storytelling

The rise of OTT (Over-the-Top) platforms has fundamentally transformed Bengali cinema and media consumption. Unlike traditional theatrical releases, which are subject to censorship, limited budgets, and audience conservatism, OTT platforms provide filmmakers with greater creative freedom to explore sensitive or marginalized themes, including queer narratives. This has several implications:

3.6. Expanded Narrative Possibilities

OTT platforms such as Hoichoi, Klikk, and other regional streaming services allow Bengali filmmakers to:

- Tell stories that are explicit about LGBTQIA+ desire, identity, and social struggle—stories that might face regulatory hurdles or limited commercial appeal in theaters.
- Experiment with non-linear storytelling, complex character development, and longer-format web series, giving more room for nuanced exploration of queer subjectivity.
- Address themes such as family conflict, societal rejection, mental health, and inter sectionalism in ways that are rarely possible in mainstream cinema.

For example, the web series Amra 2GayTher explores the challenges of same-sex love in a conservative Bengali household, focusing on the negotiation between personal identity and familial expectations. Unlike films constrained by box-office considerations or censorship, OTT series can devote time to showing everyday negotiations of queer identity, such as coming out, intimacy, and relationship conflicts.

3.7. Narrative Risk-Taking

OTT platforms encourage risk-taking because:

- The audience is more niche and targeted, allowing stories aimed at LGBTQIA+ communities or socially progressive viewers to find reception without needing mass-market approval.

• Creators can explore themes of gender fluidity, transgender identity, and queer desire without reducing them to stereotypes or comedic tropes.

• This environment has led to stories that are more honest and experimental, incorporating social commentary, psychological depth, and cultural specificity.

The OTT era also expands audience engagement:

• Viewers can stream content privately, reducing fear of stigma and allowing queer audiences to see them represented.

• The format allows for more diverse representation of gender, sexual orientation, class, and cultural background. For example, stories can focus on a transgender protagonist from rural Bengal or explore same-sex relationships in middle-class urban households, something rarely explored in theatrical cinema.

• Platforms allow feedback and interaction (comments, social media discussions), giving creators insight into audience reception and shaping future narratives.

4. Remaining Challenges

Despite the narrative freedoms offered by OTT platforms, significant challenges persist in the representation of queer subjectivity:

4.1. Stereotyping, Tokenism, and Superficial Representation

While OTT series and films can explore LGBTQIA+ themes more openly than theatrical cinema, some content falls into stereotypical portrayals or tokenistic inclusion. Characters may be reduced to a single trait—such as flamboyance, promiscuity, or tragedy—rather than being depicted as fully realized, multidimensional individuals. In some cases, queer characters are included primarily to heighten drama, shock audiences, or fulfill diversity quotas, which can undermine authenticity. This tendency limits the transformative potential of digital storytelling, as audiences may receive reinforced clichés instead of nuanced, empathetic insights into queer lives.

4.2. Limited Accessibility and Digital Divide

The reach of OTT platforms is constrained by internet access, subscription costs, and technological literacy, meaning that rural, economically marginalized, or older audiences may be excluded from viewing queer narratives. As a result, many of these stories circulate primarily within urban, middle-class, or digitally connected communities. This creates a situation where visibility and representation are unevenly distributed, potentially reinforcing existing social inequalities in access to progressive media and cultural dialogue.

4.3. Cultural Bubble and Social Acceptance

Even when stories are available online, broader societal acceptance often lags behind their availability. Many of these narratives primarily engage audiences who are already open or sympathetic to LGBTQIA+ perspectives, creating a kind of cultural bubble. While progressive, these representations may have limited impact in challenging entrenched social norms or prejudices in more conservative communities. Consequently, the potential of OTT media to act as a vehicle for widespread social change is tempered by structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers that persist outside the digital sphere.

4.4. Content Prioritization and Narrative Depth

Some OTT productions prioritize entertainment, sensationalism, or melodrama over careful exploration of queer experiences. This can result in narratives that superficially address issues of identity, desire, and marginalization without engaging with the complexity, intersectionality, and lived realities of LGBTQIA+ communities. For instance, the pressures faced by transgender characters or the nuanced negotiation of family and societal acceptance, may be oversimplified or sidelined in favor of plot-driven suspense or romance. In summary, while OTT platforms have radically expanded opportunities for queer representation, these challenges indicate that digital freedom alone is insufficient. For queer storytelling to achieve both authenticity and social impact, creators must navigate the

tensions between entertainment and education, visibility and depth, accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that diverse audiences can engage meaningfully with these narratives.

4.5. Significance for Queer Cinema

In essence, the OTT era represents a democratization of queer storytelling in Bengali media:

- It removes barriers imposed by traditional censorship and market pressures.
- It allows for long-form, emotionally complex, and socially engaged narratives.
- It creates new spaces for dialogue between creators and audiences, enabling queer identities to be portrayed as fully human, socially embedded, and culturally grounded.

Thus, the OTT era can be seen as a logical extension of Rituparno Ghosh's legacy, where earlier theatrical attempts at queer representation laid the groundwork for today's more open and diverse storytelling, even if challenges in authenticity and reception remain.

5. Discussion

The trajectory from Rituparno Ghosh's early films like Dahan (1997) to contemporary OTT content exemplifies a progressive unfolding of queer subjectivity in Bengali cinema. In Dahan, the queer lens is subtle but present: the film's focus on social marginalization, bodily autonomy, and emotional negotiation under societal pressure gestures toward the experiences of non-normative identities, even if homosexuality or transgender identity is not explicitly depicted. Here, empathy toward marginalized identities lays the groundwork for future, more overt queer storytelling. With Ghosh's later works, such as ArektiPremer Golpo (2010) and Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012), queer subjectivity moves from the margins to the narrative center. These films explicitly foreground gender fluidity, transgender experience, and non-normative desire, using cinema as a space to interrogate

performative constructions of gender (Butler, 1990) and the social scripts that regulate desire (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Queerness is no longer coded; it is embodied, relational, and socially mediated, challenging audiences to confront normative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

The rise of OTT (Over-The-Top) platforms has been a watershed moment for Bengali media, creating new spaces where queer stories can be told with greater complexity, diversity, and visibility than traditional theatrical cinema allowed. OTT platforms like Hoichoi have emerged as key sites of narrative experimentation, offering long-form content that can delve into sensitive themes without the same commercial pressures or censorship constraints faced by mainstream films. One of the most significant examples of queer-inflected storytelling on Bengali OTT is the web series Hello and its subsequent seasons. Originally streaming on Hoichoi, Hello blends elements of thriller and psychological drama while also subtly exploring non-normative relationships and the fluidity of desire. The complex relationship dynamics between characters Nandita and Nina move beyond heteronormative binaries, suggesting queer emotional entanglements without necessarily labeling them, thereby normalizing fluid forms of intimacy on a mainstream regional platform. Studies of the series note this as an example of LGBTQIA+ representation that challenges traditional frameworks and fosters inclusivity in Bengali digital content.

Another relevant instance, although not primarily focused on queer narratives, can be found in Phirki on ZEE5, which is notable for its portrayal of a transgender character, Lokkhi, in a pivotal role. The series demonstrates how digital and television platforms have opened up narrative space for transgender characters to be integrated into mainstream storylines rather than confined to peripheral or symbolic roles. Although Phirki does not center on queer romance, the presence of a transgender character within its core narrative signals a broader diversification of gender representation

on screen, made possible by the relative creative flexibility of OTT platforms and evolving audience sensibilities. Other web content — such as proposed series like Amra 2GayTher — signal an ongoing shift toward explicit queer romance and social conflict on regional digital platforms. Produced for platforms like Klikk, this series follows the relationship between two men and their attempts to navigate familial resistance, acceptance, and the social pitfalls of same-sex love, marking a clearer break from the ambiguity of earlier portrayals toward openly queer storytelling. Even where queer themes are not the central focus, digital content like additional Hoichoi originals illustrates the growing cultural space in which gender and sexuality can be portrayed more openly. Platforms increasingly commission a range of original Bengali content — from thrillers to romance — creating a fertile environment for diverse narratives that include or intersect with queer experiences.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of queer subjectivity in Bengali cinema, from Rituparno Ghosh's early works like Dahan (1997) to contemporary OTT narratives, represents a nuanced continuum of representation, visibility, and cultural negotiation. In Dahan, while queer identities are not explicitly depicted, the film's exploration of social marginalization, gendered vulnerability, and moral policing gestures toward an empathetic understanding of lives outside the normative social framework. This early sensibility laid the groundwork for Ghosh's later interventions, where queer lives are no longer peripheral but occupy the narrative center. With films such as ArektiPremer Golpo (2010) and Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012), queer subjectivity becomes explicitly articulated and embodied. These works foreground transgender identity, same-sex desire, and gender fluidity, using cinematic techniques—such as narrative layering, body-centric performance, and visual symbolism—to reveal the performative nature of gender. Applying Judith Butler's

concept of gender performativity (1990), these films show that gender is not a fixed essence but is enacted through repeated gestures, choices, and social interactions. Similarly, sexual scripting theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) illuminates how desire is mediated by cultural norms, interpersonal negotiation, and internalized social pressures, reflecting the complex ways in which queer characters navigate love, intimacy, and social belonging. The post-Ghosh era, exemplified by Kaushik Ganguly's Nagarkirtan (2019) and other contemporary films, further expands the narrative terrain. These works address intersectional dimensions of queer experience, including caste, class, and familial dynamics, emphasizing that queer subjectivity is inseparable from broader social and structural realities. The stories depict both the resilience and vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ characters, showing how social stigma, marginalization, and systemic barriers shape their lived experiences.

The emergence of the OTT era has amplified this evolution, creating digital spaces where queer narratives can flourish beyond the constraints of theatrical censorship and commercial imperatives. Web series such as Amra 2GayTher highlight intimate, everyday negotiations of queer identity, portraying familial conflict, romance, and social resistance with unprecedented visibility and narrative freedom. OTT platforms enable experimentation with form, genre, and character depth, while allowing queer audiences to engage with stories that resonate with their own lived experiences. However, the medium also presents challenges, including the risk of stereotyping and uneven attention to narrative nuance, highlighting that representation is an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed achievement. Examined through the lens of queer theory, the journey from Dahan to contemporary OTT productions shows that Bengali cinema operates not merely as a reflection of social realities but also as a performative arena in which gender, desire, and identity are expressed, challenged, and reshaped. In these films, queer subjectivity appears both as an individual experience and as relationally constructed,

influenced by cultural context, societal expectations, audience interpretation, and the possibilities offered by new media. This progression highlights a movement from subtle, coded portrayals of marginalized identities toward more direct and complex representations of queer lives, reflecting broader shifts in cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. Overall, the development of queer narratives in Bengali cinema emphasizes the power of film to foster visibility, dialogue, and social critique. From the understated moral and societal reflections of Ghosh's earlier works to the inclusive, intersectional, and digitally mediated storytelling of the OTT era, Bengali cinema has increasingly provided platforms for queer experiences to be acknowledged, humanized, and celebrated. The ongoing growth of these narratives suggests a future in which queer identities are not treated as marginal curiosities but are recognized as essential, normalized, and empathetically portrayed elements of Bengali cultural expression.

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Online Food Vlogging and Consumer Behavior: An Analysis of Changing Food Culture in Chattogram City

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Abstract:

The fast-growing digital media has resulted in new revolutionizing changes in food culture and food selection procedures. Online food vlogging has become a potent channel of communication in Bangladesh especially among the urban youth in recent years. In this paper, the researcher seeks to determine how far the visual appeal, narrative, reviews, and ratings included in food vlogs can influence food consumer habits, preferences, and food preferences, as well as restaurant preferences. The study is conducted in Chattogram City and follows a mixed-methodology with both the analysis of content of ten popular food vlogs and a survey of a hundred consumers that will be utilized. As the results show, food vlogging is helping to cause observable changes in tastes and modern eating habits. Most participants have stated that they have become more interested in commercially prepared food due to food vlogs, whereas around 45 percent of them ordered food online on a random basis. The increasing popularity of the restaurant culture can also be seen with the outcome of the survey showing that there is a trend to visit restaurants basing their choice on the quality of food, ambience, companionship, and price in a combined way.

Moreover, almost fifty percent of the respondents said they were also encouraged to make new dishes after watching food vlogs. The findings also indicate that food vlogging can easily create a false demand of food and that, as proposed by the social influence theory consumers are more likely to heavily depend on the opinions of the vloggers. In general, the discussion shows that food vlogging is transforming the food culture, consumer psychology, and restaurant-focused behavior of urban dwellers in Chattogram. The digital representation of food has ceased being a mere entertainment aspect, but it is now a major socio-cultural factor.

Keywords: Food Sovereignty; Food Habits; Food Vlogging; Consumer Behavior; Changing Food Culture; Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

Internet is considered as a revolutionary discovery of modern communication system, which after discovered has become the central element of human life by rapid development. It has been shown in many research, that internet worked not only as a communication medium but also as a significant expansion for human knowledge, social and cultural growth. (Hasibuan, 2025). In this cotemporary world, following the advancement of science and technology internet has become the fundamental part of human life. The potent system of information and communication technology have connected the world in a global range, where geographical distance is not a problem anymore. Now internet is performing a useful role in every sector of personal social and professional life. It has made every sector of everyday life including education, health, agriculture, business and entertainment easy rapid and more dynamic. (Janakantha, 2018). Keeping pace with globalization the use of social media has been spanned. Today, people of all ages are becoming dependent on digital platform, spending their free time to collecting necessary information, travel planning, shopping or to decide what to eat. As a result, internet has been significantly influencing people's lifestyle, habit and preferences. According to (Patwardhan & Yang 2003) that in modern life, today social media is one of the

important parts of daily habit and main source of exchanging information and experience of people. As a continuation of this, food vlogging - food oriented content making and sharing has added a new level in food habit and taste in food of people. Especially urban people are gradually being more influenced in context of food selection and deciding consumer policy. From ancient time Chattogram as a port city is a gathering of trade, culture and multinational people. being located on the bank of the river Karnaphuli it is the second largest city of Bangladesh, which historical, geographical and cultural diversity has enriched and diversified food culture. that's why to investigate the function of food vlogging in the food habit of people of Chattogram city is the main purpose of this research. The impact of food vlogging on changes food habit and taste in food of the citizen of Chattogram will be investigated.

1.1. Significance of the study

The rapid growth of digital media and overuse of social media has revolutionized the information exchanging, consumer behavior and lifestyle pattern. In this continuation of changing an uprising and vital medium is food vlogging, where the content creators present food experience, recipe, review of a restaurant and food culture related information as a video. Notably during the time of covid 19 pandemic lockdown food vlogging has gained a great popularity. Which has increased the longevity for food of common user (Sheyam& Naher, 2021). These visual content from social media like Facebook Instagram, YouTube have attracted consumer for differ rent types of food. A food vlogger can influence his viewers decision through the technique of presentation, visual, platemaking, sharing personal experience. Since it can be presumed that food vlogging has real influence on food habit food culture and preferences. There some important reasons of analysis the impact of food vlogging on food habit of consumer are

1.2. Understanding consumer behavior

By analyzing the way food vlogging influencing the food

related decisions of people, food supplier, vendor and content creator will have insightful concept on shifting tastes and choices of consumer.

1.3. Analysis of digital platform and social impact

This research will add fresh knowledge on that topic such as social impact shaped by social media, online influencer culture and the way digital media changes people sentiment and behavior specially eating habit.

1.4. Health concern

It is crucial to know how food vlogging influencing food choices of people either positively or negatively 0n the background of increasing lifestyle related disease including obesity and diabetes.it has often noticed that although having no necessity food vlogging can attract people toward specific food, which increases the tendency of having extra and unhealthy food.so this research can give valuable insight on potential role of those digital platform to promote healthy food habit and control unhealthy food habit.

1.5. Assessment of changes in urban food culture

In a metropolitan like Chattogram city to evaluate any visual changes in food culture because of food vlogging, the result of this research will be specifically helpful

2. Review of Literature

Online based publication" blog "which full form is web blog, mainly a personal online diary or publication (Rahman, 2023). Bloggers daily upload fresh writing to their blog and comment section is open for readers (Manira Khatun, 2020). With time being, blogging has been expanded through different social media. Vlog mainly stand for blog content provided through video. Which is the complete version of digital media and now popular on platform like Instagram, YouTube etc. (Rahman, 2023).

It has been shown at the local level research in Chattogram on food culture, that social and economic shifting have outstandingly influenced the changes in food habit and food

choices. Jannatul Nayem and Asadul Goni (2020) researchers from the Anthropology department of Chattogram university in their study titled as "changes in food culture of Chattogram: An Anthropological analysis" have presented the influence of restaurant culture in evolution of local food culture. they have portraited that economic development, increase in income and urbanization have brought changes in people's food habit. though impact of food blogging on food habit was not considered in their research. which now will fill up a great void in present study. An Indian researcher Lina flip (2016) has shown that food-based picture video and detailed recipe have direct impact on readers and viewers. Her research suggests that food vlogging generates interest in people for new food and besides positive influences it could be creating some negative influences also (Philip, 2016). Indonesian researchers, Nathalia and her assistants stated that, food vloggers inspire their viewers for healthy eating habit and often successfully bring changes in viewers food habit and lifestyle. In their opinion, there become a mutual relationship between food vloggers and their viewers, which has a significant role in changing attitude (Nathalia et al., 2026). Chirmulay and Peshave (2019) have stated food vlogging as food based online journalism, where information like food inquiry, taste and benefits, recipe, price restaurant location is being presented via video and photography. As result food vlogs play a significant role to create consumer overview about food culture, new food or popular restaurant of any city. (Shirolkar et al., 2014) shown that modern consumers are increasingly dependent on online recommendation for regular decision like restaurant selection. Social media specially food vlog is influencing people toward specific food or restaurant. According to the study of (Shah & Mishra, 2021). Instagram is the largest digital platform in India which has more than 10 million followers. Flashy food's pictures and videos in Instagram rapidly attract consumer and it's been shown in research that consumer have shown interest to try that specific food after watching. At the same time food vloggers play a role to spread awareness of healthy food habit. Chen et al. (2015) has shown that food vlogging

influences consumer's psychological necessity, satisfaction and, emotional response. Often although having no physical hunger, consumers attracted towards food mentally, that freshly creates consumer behavior. as a result, food vloggers regularly adopt a new strategy to attract viewers.

Besides it has been seen in some recent studies that social media-based food vlog and food video significantly influencing consumer's food habit and taste in food. (Narayanam & Charyulu, 2025) have shown, YouTube food vlogs increase young generation interest toward restaurant going tendency and new food. Nathalia et al. (2016) and Zhao (2023) have pointed out that, food vlogger's presentation and food patterns influence viewer's behavioral decisions and health consciousness, where unhealthy food comparatively generates more attraction. (Partanen &Uusiautti, 2023) have shown that, food vlogging creates a social and emotional bond through food presentation. On the other hand (Spaccarotella & Gido, 2022) have demonstrated, although food vlogs influencing home hooking but there is still a lack of nutritional awareness. this study indicates that though food vlogging has a strong impact on shifting food culture, there is necessity of more study at local level. From the above literature review, it is evident that food vlogging influences consumers in social, psychological and behavioral perspective. But there has been comparatively less research on topics like changes in consumer's social-psychological experience due to influence of food vlogs on social media, changing taste in food and evolution of urban foodculture.as a result, the necessity for more evident based study on this topic is crucial.

2.1. Research goal

This research is grounded in curiosity about human communication and social impact. Food vlogging is a gradual popular content on Bangladeshi social media which presumed to play an important role in consumer's food selection, decision making and liking-disliking. Food vloggers create food related video content keeping various objective in view, that can influence viewer's behavior and taste shifting.

In this context the objective of proposed research is-to observe and analyze what kind of social-psychological impact on changes in consumer's food habit and taste in food is created by food vlogs.

2.2. Research objective

The research objective is to find out answer of specific question applying scientific method and seeking real and practical truth which is yet not identified enough. The main objective of this research is to analysis on consumer's food habit and taste in food what kind of social- psychological impacts are exerted by food vlogs.

To achieve main research goal the following specific objectives are decided-

- To determine what kind of interest consumers, develop towards food products or dishes after watching food vlogs.
- To explore the strategies used by food vloggers to present food
- To analyze how mass media and social media influence and strengthen food vlogs
- To examine the level of objectivity in food vloggers content presentation
- To analyze the overall impact of food vlogging on people's food habits, food preferences and behavior

2.3. Theoretical structure

2.3.1. Two step flow theory

- The theoretical foundation of this research is the widely discussed two step flow theory of mass media (Paul lazarsfeld et al., 1948). according to this theory, information from mass media is not directly received by common people; rather the information initially received by opinion leaders, later they explain it and is sent to others, as a result flow of information's is done in two steps.

- Food vloggers share information about food experiences and recommendations on social media. Viewers often depend on these vlogs before selecting food and restaurant. thus, food vloggers act as modern opinion leaders and play an influential role in shaping food related decision

This study analyzes whether food vlogging, through the Lense of the two-step flow theory, plays a role in changing consumers' food habit and food preferences.

3. Hypothesis

Hypothesis in research is the probable answer, which provide the direction of scientific investigation. Those topics researcher intends to investigate, hypothesis work as probable Ans of those topics.

In this proposed study the following hypotheses are decided:

- Food vlogging has an influence in changes of people's food habit and taste in food
- Watching food vlogs increases consumer's interest in commercial food.
- Commercial food has become comparatively more popular than homemade food in urban society.
- Food vlogger's rating and reviews create artificial food demand among urban consumers.
- Food vlogging promotes online food ordering and contribute to the growth of digital food culture.

4. Research methodology

In this study a mix methodology is used, where both qualitative and quantitative data have collected and analyzed to investigate the solve of research problem.in this mixed method both numerical (quantitative) and descriptive (qualitative) data are analyzed together.

4.1. Data collection techniques

Two main data collection method have been followed-

4.1.1. Question answer survey method

Through This commonly used method in social science research, from 100 citizens quantitative data has been collected with the help of questionnaire. This survey was conducted by online google form.

4.1.2. Content analysis

According to definition of Holsti (1968)-message characteristics were systematically identified and analyzed to examine content patterns and presentation styles.

4.1.3. Sampling method

Sampling is the process for selecting specific unit from a whole large population In this research sample are selected in two parts

4.1.4. Food vlog sample (Qualitative sample)

From social media platform Ten popular food vlogs are selected based on the highest view, share and reaction.

4.1.5. Survey sample (Purposive sample)

Based on purposive sampling ,100 citizens of Chattogram city were included in this survey.

5. Data analysis

Content analysis in this study selected ten popular food vlogs of social media have been brought under content analysis. as selected vlogs are highly viewed, liked and commented, they have been considered to be able to widespread influence on taste in food and decision making of city-based viewers. Instead of analyze different vlogs, here analysis is presented based on repeated theme, presentation technique and overall social psychological influences.

5.1. Food presentation style and visual techniques

In almost every food vlog, the trend of very attractive and appealing presentation of food can be noticed. Emphasis is placed on close up shot, slow-motion visuals, smoke or vibrant spice footage while cooking and plating moments of food. This visual presentation makes the taste and quality of food more appealing than reality. Specially in street food and restaurant review based emotional language creates an instant attraction among viewers. On the other hand, in recipe based and village cooking vlog's even though simplicity, nature, step by step cooking process are shown, in those as well visual attraction has played the main element role.

5.2. Use of titles, thumbnails and language

Content analysis shows that, almost in every vlog sensational and attractive words have been used in titles and thumbnails such as "best", "level 999"," you can eat as much as you want","100-taka vs 1000 taka" etc. although this type of language increases click-attraction of viewers, often presents food quality an experience in an overly positive manner.

At the point of language, in majority of the vlog's casual, spoken and personal experience-based description can be noticed, which creates a friendly relation with viewers. This friendly language makes vloggers trustworthy to the viewers and increases tendency to accept opinion.

5.3. Food vloggers role as opinion leaders

In analyzed food vlogs the role of food vloggers is not limited to informant; rather they work as opinion leaders. Vlogger's personal opinion on taste of food price environment and overall experience have direct impact on viewer's food related decisions. It is been seen in many vlogs; viewers expressed their interest in going restaurant according to suggestion of vloggers through comment. This tendency is compatible with two step flow theory, where messages from mass media initially explained by opinion leaders outreach common viewers.

5.4. Sponsorship business and question of objectify

Through content analysis in many vlogs the present of sponsorship and commercial engagement can be noticed. in those vlogs generally the negative side, limitation or critical analysis are absent.as a result presentation becomes unidirectional and overly positive manner in most cases. In sponsored content, to question food's quality and experience is limited, that can generate artificial food demand among viewers. This commercial tendency has turned food vlogging into mixed content of entertainment and advertising in many cases.

5.5. Health, nutrition and absence of social space

In majority of the analyzed food vlogs, discussion on the health benefits of food, nutritional value, and longtime impact is limited or absent. Specially in fast food, buffet and street food-based vlog the risk of overeating, health guidelines and food safety are ignored. Apart from that, even though in few vlogs the social and cultural background of food such as tradition, history or food habit of local people have included shortly.in most of the case entertaining presentation has been periodized.

5.6. Overall impact on viewers

Overall content analysis suggests that, food vlogs are able to make a notable impact on viewers food habit and decision making. vlogs have fortified the interest to try new food, restaurant-oriented behavior, the growing trend of online food dependency.

Same time, visual exaggeration, personal compliment and sponsored presentation can allure viewers emotionally and psychologically, which often encourage to take food beyond any practical necessity

5.7. Comparative Analysis (Food Blog 1–10) Appendix Note

Food vlog	Theme/ Storytelling	Headline	Visual value	Review impartiality	Engagement
1, 8 (The Food Ranger	International perspective, action-oriented review	Dramatic, long, intriguing	Cinematic, close-up, slow-motion	Mainly positive; health risk is said to be low	High views, likes and comments
2, 3, 6, 7, 10 (Domestic)	Review-focused; location, price and taste description	General / Somewhat curious	Occasional random shots; camera less advanced	Positive, sponsored content is more biased	Medium–high engagement
4, 5 (Cooking-based)	Cooking based on rural culture and tradition	Moderate attraction	Visually simple; realistic	Mostly neutral	Moderate
9 (Village Cooking Channel)	Regional cuisine, rural experience	Local, common	Simple visuals, strong cultural reality	Neutral	130 million views, high engagement

5.8. Analysis–Table: Food vlog 1–10

Vlog No.	Theme	Headline attraction	Storytelling	Visual/ editing	Objectivity	Effect	Engagement	Sponsor	Source
1	Street food	very interesting	Excellent	Good	Partial	moderate	High	Yes	The Food Ranger.(2018, March 8)
2	City-based food (Rajshahi)	General	Excellent	Moderate	Neutral	Low	Moderate	Yes	Khudalagse. (2023, June 23)
3	Pice hotel (Kolkata)	Acceptable	Excellent	Moderate	Neutral	Moderate	Acceptable	None	Bangladeshi Food Reviewer. (2023, February 24)
4	Recipe-based	Weak	Excellent	General	Neutral	Moderate	Too high	None	TradiSwad. (2019, December 29)
5	Traditional cooking	Weak	Moderate	Weak	Weak	Low	Moderate	None	Lost and Rare Recipes. (2022, June 10
6	Buffet–Review	Weak	Weak	Weak	Biased	Low–medium	Moderate	Yes	FoodAppi. (2023, February 9
7	Street food (Kolkata)	Moderate	Weak	Weak	Partial	Low	High	Yes	Rafsan The Choto Bhai. (2021, December 25)

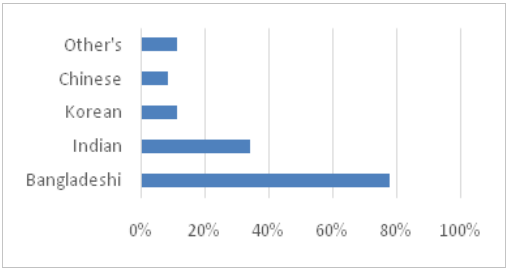
8	Street food (Peshawar)	Interesting at the time	Excellent	Moderate	Partial	Moderate	Very high	None	The Food Ranger. (2018, April 27)
9	Rural Cooking	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Neutral	Low	Too high	None	Village Cooking Channe. (2021, September 1)
10	Comparative Iftar	Very interesting	Weak	Weak	Neutral	Low–medium	High	None	Rafsan TheChotobhai. (2023, April 1)

5.9. Data Presentation (survey)

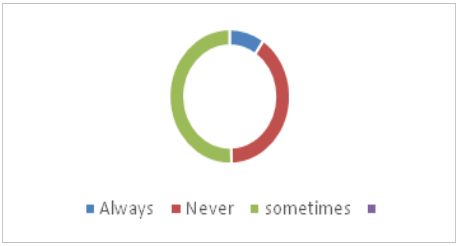
What type of food vlog is most viewed?



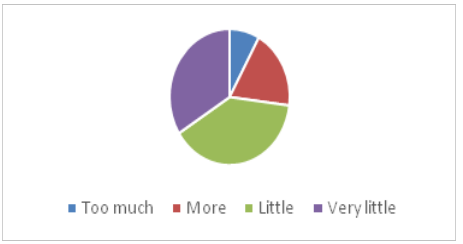
Which country's food vlogs are most popular?



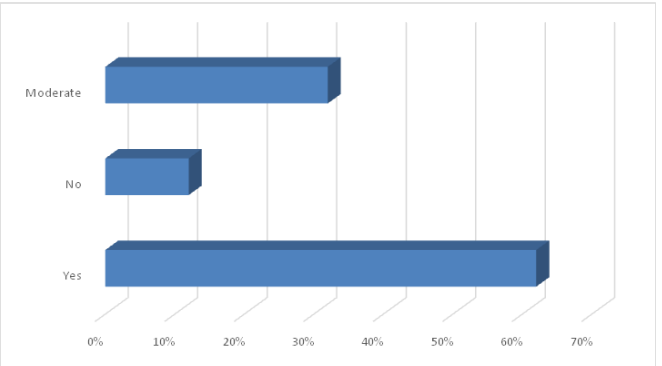
The role of food vlogs in choosing restaurants



Interest after the advent of video blogs



Changes in eating habits due to the influence of food vlogging



5.10. Data analysis (survey):

From the survey data analysis, conducted among hundred participants of Chattogram city it is observed that online food vlogging has a subtle but continuous impact on urban resident's food habit, food preferences and food-related decisions.

5.10.1. Participants social-demographical characteristic:

Among the participants in survey most of the respondents are 20 to 30 years old (70%), which suggests that mostly young people are involved in food vlogging. In context of monthly income an abundance of middle class is observed, which makes a social space for analysis the impact of food vlogging on food budget and recreational food choices. The

equal participation of man and woman increased the leading value of this survey.

5.10.2. Habit of watching food vlog and digital platform

It is observed in survey; majority of the respondents watch food vlog even if not regularly. in spite of comparatively little daily watching time, food vlogging has been able to influence behavior. Facebook is identified as most using platform, that is compatible to the digital media reality of Bangladesh.

5.10.3. Type of content and country-based preferences

Result suggests that, street food and restaurant-based food vlogs are most popular. Street foods have become more popular to the viewers for its cheap price accessibility and entertaining presentation.in context of country-based preferences though Bangladeshi food vlogs are most popular, a notable influence of Indian content can be seen, that indicates the regional influence.

5.10.4. estaurant culture and food choices

According to the survey, majority of respondents do not visit restaurant regularly but on special occasions.in context of restaurant selection though food vlogs may not always finalize decision, but they act as supporting element. In restaurant selection apart from food taste, price, environment and present of partner also play a significant role, that highlights having food as a social experience.

5.10.5. Online order, health and deception experience

Majority of the respondents are still hesitant when ordering food online. Although health problem experience is comparatively low, but not totally absent. Some participants reported that they did not receive the expected experience at restaurants or either food after watching food vlogs, which indicates exaggerated presentation in vlogs.

5.10.6. Changes in dietary habits and interest in cooking

It is observed in survey, though food vlogging didn't bring major changes its gradually influencing dietary habits.

Notable number of the respondents mentioned about increases in interest to try and cook new food.it indicates that food vlogging not only encourages tendency of eating out but also can generate interest in home cooking.

5.10.7. Social pressure and impact on traditional dietary habit

According to the results, food consumption decision often decided upon friends, family and social settings, even if there is no personal intention. besides, a majority of the respondents believe, food vlogging has impact on their traditional food habit and taste in food.it indicates a slow but explicit change in urban food culture.

6. Findings of the study

In this research to analysis the influence of food vlogging on food habit and food preferences of citizens of Chattogram, two types of information including survey and content analysis are used by analyzingcollected data some significant results have been found that explicitly presents the trend of shifting food culture and consumer attitude.

6.1. Trend of watching food vlog and platform-based use

Almost everyone among 100 participants in survey have informed about watching food vlogs in any way. Facebook and Instagram are identified as major platforms to watch food vlogs. The result indicates that video based visual content gradually becoming influential in food related decision making of consumers.

6.2. Impact of food vlogging on food preferences and food selection

It's been studied in research that after watching food vlogs a noticeable change occurs in consumer's taste in food. Majority of respondents informed, presented visual of food, description of taste, personal review in food vlogs encourage them to try new food. Specially attraction toward fast food, street food and foreign cuisine is comparatively more increased.

Almost half of the participants admitted that due to watching food vlog they have developed interest to try unfamiliar or comparatively less familiar food.it suggests that food vlogging is creating food curiosity and experimental food behavior.

6.3. Expansion of restaurant culture and commercial food

The result analysis shows, food vlogging is playing a significant role in expansion of commercial food and restaurant culture in Chattogram. Almost 45% of the participants in the survey mentioned, they regularly or irregularly order food in online where food vlogs work as a great motivation behind it. Moreover, during restaurant selection participants emphasize on not only taste of food but also on price, vlogger rating and online reviews. It's saying, in modern urban society having food is not only a physical need; it's became a part of social experience and entertainment.

6.4. Comparison between home cooked food and commercial food

An important outcome of this study, that food vlog is increases interest in commercial food rather than home cooked food. Many participants mentioned that although having no actual hunger they crave specific food after watching food vlogs. But at the same time almost half of the participants informed about having interest in cooking new food at home after watching food vlog. Specially recipe-based food vlogs are playing a supporting role in increasing interest and creativity toward cooking. In consequences, the impact of food vlogging is not unidirectional; it simultaneously influencing both consumers and cooking trend.

6.5. Food vloggers role as opinion leaders

content analysis shows that, food vloggers acting as digital opinion leaders. Viewers depend on vlogger's opinion, rating and personal review before visiting a restaurant. This trend supports two step flow theory, where message of mass media initially is explained by opinion leaders then pass to the common people. Food vlogger's personal credibility, language and presentation exerting a great impact on viewer's decision.

6.6. Artificial food demand and psychological impact

Moreover, study shows that sometimes food vlogging creates artificial food demand. Many participants admitted, although having no physical hunger they have craved for specific food after watching food vlogs. This finding is compatible with social impact theory and consumer mentality where visual stimulus and motivational speech influence the emotion and necessity of human. Exaggerated presentation and sponsored content often encourage consumer to make decision beyond actual necessity

6.7. Overall evolution in urban food culture

Overall findings of this research suggest that, online food vlogging bringing a visual change in food culture of Chattogram city. Having food is now not only based upon physical need or nutrition; it has become a part of social status, entertainment and digital culture. Food vlogging is freshly shaping the food preferences, consumer behavior and restaurant dependent lifestyle of city dwellers, which can bring more changes in urban food culture frame in future.

7. Conclusion

Now a days vlog has become an inevitable part of people's digital daily habit .in context of Bangladesh vlog culture was mainly inaugurated after 1999, and it became popular in 2005 through participation of young generation .in continuation of this trend the rise of food vlogging took place during the last ten. specially in 2013-2014 it expanded through social media. Gradually different types of communities have developed based on food vlogging, where people from different profession and class are connecting to this platform to share their food experiences. Content analysis shows that based on type of food, quality, price, environment of restaurant, taste analysis and popularity of tasty food a total new food culture has formed. Although it was started based on Facebook, but now YouTube is the most popular platform for food vlogging. Because of easy access to smartphone and internet, today food vlogging is not something special or rare; rather

it is working as daily entertainment, information source and food guide for many. Although food is the fundamental need of human, in modern social media, it's been evolving into an aesthetic and cultural experiences. Food vloggers deliver the flavor and beauty of food through refined writing, attracting picture, lively video. As a result, restaurant culture, food economy, digital food marketing is having a fresh growth. Many people professionally doing food vlogging which can be a significant part of food industry in future. There can be recipe, restaurant review, food story or travel related food experience in food vlogs. Food should be presented as it strikes hunger even by watching and this responsibility is done by food vloggers in many ways. But making food vlog is not an easy task it requires hardworking, time-consuming and skillful processes.

The key finding of this research was, whether food vlog influences daily food habit and food preferences of peoples. The survey and result of content analysis suggest that food vloggers as popular media influencers playing a crucial role in consumers food culture, food habit and attraction for commercial food.

So, in conclusion it can be said that now food vlogging is not only an entertainment; it is playing an active role to build a modern and digital food culture in urban society of Bangladesh.

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8. Appendix

Selected food vlogs for content analysis

Sl. No	Headline of Food vlog	Channel name	Release date	Types of content	Link
1	LEVEL 9999 Street Food in Dhaka, Bangladesh	The Food Ranger	9th March, 2019	Street Food	https://youtu.be/V2jk8PclZwg?si=ZnErx-7Acl9D4kCK
2	Tried all the Famous Food of Rajshahi	Khudalagse	23 June, 2023	Local Food	https://youtu.be/33by8SPQRlg?si=EWn6H1NvINebkXAw
3	কলকাতার পাইস হোটেলে: কলা পাতায় ভাত, পোস্তোরেবড়া, আলুমাখা	Bangladeshi Food Reviewer	24 February, 2023	Restaurant review	https://youtu.be/NlEqa21CRdo?si=IbmPQ0h5GnLRGKWi
4	Rasmalai বানানোযে এতো সহজ এই ভিডিও টনা দখেলে হয়তো বশি্বাস করতনে না	TradiSwad	29 December 2019	Home Cooking	https://youtu.be/wJo34FqRu2E?si=yXUmpTmL2mukJJfL
5	খুড়বো (চটিগাং)	Lost and Rare Recipes	10th June, 2022	Local Food	https://youtu.be/agc__chqpfs?si=Clq4YVqT-BqnqmFnM
6	যত খুশি খতে পারবনে মাত্র ৫৯০ টাকায়	FoodAppi	9th February, 2023	Restaurant review	https://youtu.be/-YPxPedpil8?si=5hqBHVCLCV2gYIgT
7	Kolkata Street Food with @ TheLazyBong	Rafsan The Choto Bhai	25 December, 2021	Street Food	https://youtu.be/xPrxE09nDzs?si=JB5hBhJTZrr-qBtQ
8	Street Food in Peshawar	The Food anger	27 April, 2019	Street Food	https://youtu.be/NQDom2gxiVc?si=WYMvf-CllJo20-s-t
9	Full Chicken Roast, Whole Fried Chicken Recipe Cooking in Village	Village Cooking Channel	1st September, 2021	Local Food and Home Cooking	https://youtu.be/PVcAhAxQcgM?si=noMx5LVYfXas1n-4
10	100 Taka vs 10000 Taka iftar	Rafsan TheChotobhai	1st April, 2023	Street Food and Restaurant review	https://youtu.be/yujkKUsVk9M?si=GIfMHwVbeo6Uwww8

Civic Engagement: Examining the Role of Media Literacy in Digital Activism

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Abstract

The contemporary Indian public sphere especially has been testimony to the rise of digital activism as a powerful form of civic participation where citizens can gather around issues such as agrarian distress, gender justice, institutional accountability, and others. Today, in the Indian public sphere, digital activism has become a prominent force for civic engagement, empowering citizens to unite on issues of agrarian distress, gender justice, institutional accountability and beyond. While the increased ownership of smartphones and cheaper mobile data has made the political public sphere more inclusive, they have also made it vulnerable to misinformation, echo-chambers and "click tivism". The paper is about media literacy's ability to bridge the divide between the momentary nature of digital engagement and more sustained civic participation. Through the works of Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, this paper contends that media literacy skills are an important civic competency required for the robustness of democracy.The paper, by exploring recent cases from India such as the farmers' protests (2020-2021), the grassroots mobilization of COVID-19 aid networksand student movements like the #MeToo India and the anti-CAAprotests, illustrates that media literacy enables individuals to authenticate information, resist disinformation, to coordinate distributed agency and to convert outrage into tangible, real-world action. Through these analyses, movements embedded with media literacy skills proved to be more resistant to misinformation and more effective.

This paper discusses institutional barriers that impede media literacy in India which include the continuing digital divide along with lines of gender, caste and geographies and challenges such as linguistic diversity and political polarization. It also suggests ways of overcoming such obstacles. The paper concludes with proposing a multi-stakeholder model of integrating media literacy education, NGO activity and policy making, essential to the democratic structure in India and in making digital activism a true tool of civil participation and social justice.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Digital Activism, Media Literacy, India, Misinformation, Participatory Democracy

1. Introduction

India's relationship with the state has been irrecoverably changed by the emergence of the digital. With over 800 million internet users and a dominant way of accessing the web through affordable smartphones, India has been one of the largest and most rapidly expanding digital public sphere in the world (IAMAI, 2023). In tandem with this hyperconnectivity is the rise of political expression in its digital manifestation-digital activism. From hash tag activism like #Me Too India to the mobilization of huge protests like those held in 2020-21 during the farmers' movements, digital space shave come to be one of the most important sites of citizen ship. Butthe digital space isnotwithout its shareof problems. While the digital tool has been used to mobilize citizen son an unprecedented scale, it has also helped spread deep fakes, communal misinformation, and organized trolling. The question of slacktivism, of the extent to whichthese online low-risk, low-effort digital engagements such as "liking a post or changing aprofile picture are used as a substitute for action" is a key contention for activists and scholars alike (Morozov, 2009). In this context, media literacy appears as the key variable, which will turn digital noise into true civic engagement. This paper will answer the following two questions: How media literacy influences the effectiveness of digital activism in India? What methods of promoting media literacy can help promote strong

civic engagement? In this way, it contributes to the expanding body of literature on digital citizenship in the Global South by arguing that in India, literacy now refers to a cap a city to discern, to verify, and to organise.

2. Theoretical Framework

To grasp how civic engagement, media literacy and digital activism are intertwined, two theories will be applied in this article:The notion of participatory culture by Henry Jenkins and critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire.

2.1. Participatory Cultureand Civic Potential

According to Henry Jenkins, "participatory culture. Has low barriers to artistic and civic involvement...Fans, hobbyists, and citizens are becoming active creators and producers rather than passive consumers" (2006). The citizen journalists and activists on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram have had a direct impact in creating the national discourse on events like the Manipur ethnic violence or Kerala floods. However, Jenkins notes that participation alone may not result in civic outcomes, as such, media literacy enables such participation to develop civic potential by providing tools such as collaboration, network building and critical evaluation.

2.2. Critical Pedagogy and Empowerment

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed is crucial in the orizing critical literacy as' reading the word and the world'. For Freire, 'education is not a process of acquiring and depositing knowledge inthe minds of individuals, but rather one ofliberation, aimed at the developmentof 'conscientization' which can be interpreted as acquiring an awareness and then interacting within one's social reality'. In the internet era critical media literacy implies an engagementwith media content, not merely to decode it, but to pose fundamental questions concerning power and structures that support the production of the messages contained in the media. While class, caste and gender hierarchies are already strong sources of disparity in India, criticalmedia literacy aims to

empower the citizens to take direct action against oppression withinthese digital spaces, demanding a political voice on these platforms.

3. India's digital sphere: strengths and weaknesses

The digital sphere in India is unique; the mass of new internet users from rural and low-income backgrounds began to flow in with Reliance Jio's introduction of mobile internet services in 2016, with a dramatic reduction in the cost of mobile data access.

This democratization of access is however, good and bad: On one hand, this unprecedented access has provided an infrastructure for mass mobile sation. The 2020-21 farmers' protests in particular was largely mobilized by Punjabi Diaspora networks through Instagram which provided connect and communication with local farmers, and with a well organised media strategy that ensured the successful broadcast of the protests through international media channels, even featuring interviews with rural farmers who clearly articulated their grievances to an international audience (Kaur, 2021) through well organized use of digital tools, implying a high degree of 'grassroots media literacy'. On the other hand, India is one of the country's most vulnerable to disinformation; the spread of forwarded messages on Whatsapp often featuring doctored images and videos leading to riots and mobs (Parthasarathy, 2020), the extensive use of bots by political parties during elections etc have further polluted the internet sphere. India, thus is in a paradox of having tools of massive civic engagement at disposal, but a largely poisoned internet sphere where media literacy can effectively filter the useful out of the vast digital noise.

4. The Mediating Role of Media Literacy

It is argued in this section that media literacy is a mediator between digital activism and substantive civic engagement. This function is explained in three folds, verification, contextualization, and translation.

4.1. Verification: combating fake news

Acitizens capacity to verify source information whether by finding out whether the image in a WhatsApp forwarded message was indeed what it was purported to be, whether the metadata ofa video was genuine, or by cross-checking the stated factswith the official version, becomesthe most immediate role of media literacy, between a citizen who believes in an online movement that stands on facts and one who believes in a false digital movement. In a world filled with WhatsApp forward messages, this becomes crucial. During COVID 19, for example, the Indian state spray disinfection from the skies and detaining migrant workers, etc, spread through social media sites, where it was fact-checked, as with The Covid SOS India network (volunteer led organization) which tried to find and circulate accurate information about availability of oxygen, beds, plasma donors through its citizen network of digital activists. By becoming a "digital gate-keeper" these citizens mediatedbetween information and its reception and turned online activity into saving civic participation.

4.2. Contextualization: underst and the details

Digital activism and the spread of social movements through it often simplify complex issues into tweet-able tags, making them accessible but failing to build up to deeper, long term civil engagement unless citizens understand the context behind an issue. Media literacy plays this role of giving context through making sure that citizens grasp the social, historical, and legal backdrop behind the issue at hand. In the case of student movements against the Citizenship AmendmentAct in 2019-2020, which were highly polarized on social media sites (supporters: secular, constitutional; detractors: anti-national), a citizen with high media literacy skills would look beyond memes and short videos, at the detailed legal text of the bill, its historical background regarding Indian citizenship, and the parliamentary debates on the topic. By engaging in this, citizens will find a deeper understanding, that allows them to formula te more informed arguments when writing their

opinions to the media, participating in meetings with elected representatives, or participating in a legal demonstration, rather than just forwarding a tweet.

4.3. Translation: to action from on-lineactivities

The true measure of civic engagement lies in the effect it has in the real world. Media literacy enables the "translation" of digitally mobilized energy to offline action, as a part of digital activism and mobilization. It refers to citizen skills in digital organization such as using encrypted chats to secure activists, google forms for resource management and mapping softwareforco-ordination. Feministandwomen'srights groups in India, in fact, relygreatly on media literacy skills as they often use digital platforms after cases such as Nirbhaya (2012) to call for demonstrations and create new reporting networks. A campaign like Pinjra Tod against curfews in hostels onwomen utilizesdigital activism to create support for, and organize protests, alongside on ground action. Its success at engaging in the anti-surveillance, anti- trolling environment was a result of the ability of these activists to use their media literacyskills for a specific goal, and its failurewithout them might result in online outrage which stays exactly that.

5. Challenges: Barriers to Media Literacy in India

It's really important to discuss what hinders Media Literacy. We seealo to fstructural problems that prevent Media Literacy from being successfully adopted in India:

5.1.The Digital Divide

We have made significant progress in terms of internet accessibility in the country but it is stilla divided landscape. How much people can access the internet depends upon the gender, caste, and location.As shown by IAMAI, men were twice as likely to have access to a mobile phone and unrestricted internet than women in rural areas. Margilised caste groups faced prejudice in the digital space, leading them to self-censorthemselves or leave theplatform entirely. Itwould be pointless to focus on the pedagogical use of Media Literacy without taking these disparities into account.

5.2.Linguistic Diversity

India is a country with numerous languages. Although discussions on digital activism oftentake place in English, a large portion of the online population consume their information in vernacular languagessuch asTamil, Hindi,Bengali andMarathi. Misinformation on theselocal languages are often more destructive than its english counterpart because there are less people dedicated to fact checking the news. To truly be impactful, Media Literacy needs to be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

5.3. Political Polarization and Echo Chambers

The nature of how social media platforms work through algorithms have caused a trend of"echo chambers", that constantly provide its users with the information that reinforces existing views and makes the users immune to counter claims and false facts. In such scenarios, even highly digitally literate individuals may not be able to accept verified information if it conflicts withtheirpoliticalideology; this is what they term "identity protective cognition".

5.4. Pathways for Improving Media Literacy

India needs a "multistake holder" approach toward developing and increasing the reach ofMediaLiteracyprograms. Thisapproachneedstoincorporatenotjustschoolsandcivil societies, but the various institutions that the media literacy program is intended to interactwith.

5.5. Formals Education Reform

The current system of education in India solely focuses on rote memorization and traditional literacy. However, NEP 2020 brings new opportunities for promoting critical thinking andusage of technology through a "holistic, multidimensional approach to learning". We must introduce school curricula that train students to "detect fallacies of logic, verify digital sources andunderstandthealgorithmsthat driveonlineexperiences."However,medialiteracyneeds to be part of not just a single subject but interwoven into languages, social sciences, computer sciences and many other subjects.

5.6. Civil Society and Grassroots Training

NGOs and local community groups are leading the fight to expand Media Literacy to theground level. Organisations like the "Digital Empowerment Foundation" and "Internet Saathi" (a Google and Tata Trusts partnership) have trained numerous women in rural areas. These programs, however, need to transcend their "operational" goals and expand towards teaching "critical"skills.Theroleof the local library andthelocalradio stationshould notbeoverlooked as these spaces may function as an "information hub".

5.7. Institutional and Plat form Accountability

The problem of Media Literacy cannot be seen as an individual responsibility alone. Social media platforms hold immense responsibility for the amplification of destructive and biased content. The Indian IT Minister has enacted rules about media platforms, but they have also been criticized for possibly overstepping boundaries of free speech and interfering with the democraticprocess. A carefulbalancemustbestruckwhere platformsaremade transparent and take part in collaborative efforts with experts to prevent the spread of fake news without infringing user privacy and free speech.

5.8. Intergenerational and Peer Learning

Within the existing Indian family system, there are ample opportunities for learning between generations. While the young are digitally fluent, they often lack the context and experience to critically analyze information like their elders. By promoting dialog ues between members of the household about online safety and critically evaluating news, families can be "resilient community-based defense" mechanisms against misinformation.

6. Case study: The Farmer's Protest (2020-2021)

To demonstrate the arguments made, the Farmers' Protest has been chosen as a representative event of a large-scale citizen led social mobilization utilizing the internet to such a significant extent. A movement against three agricultural laws that continued for over a year and a half witnessed

numerous farmers from the older generation (many of them from rural Punjab and Haryana) forming and managing WhatsApp groups and other forms of social media to disseminate information, organize supply chains for food and medical supplies and arrange for meetings (khappanchay at sortraditional village councils). This was happening simultaneously to the social media campaign managed by young people and a network of Indian diasporas on X, Instagram and Facebook.

6.1. The Role of Media Literacy:

- Detection: This enabled fact-checkers working under various independent Twitter handles (for example, @ FarmsFactCheck) to combat government-funded fake news about protestingfarmers burning fields or blocking roads with extreme violence.

- Translation: This allowed to translate individual grievances to a language that could be recognized and accepted as an issue of "human rights" globally and gain international support.

- Resilience: Although many attempts were made to undermine the farmers and smear theirimage as "foreign funded" or "Khalistani terrorists," their support base was relativelyuntouched and they maintained their composure due to a level of social cohesion fostered by online messaging systems and careful media engagement.

However, there were disadvantages to the extent the platform was utilized. The same platforms used for support, also became a source for the spread of violence and propaganda against the farmers, highlighting the polarized role that the internet could play and the crucial part that MediaLiteracy playedinseparatingreliableinformationfromstate-sanctioned misinformation.

7. Conclusion

The way citizens of India interact with each other and the way civic life operates are being molded and reshaped by technology. The potential for democratic participation and

empowerment offered by digital activism can, however be undermined by the spread of misinformation, a shallow understanding of the political implications of digital activities, and manipulation for individual or state-driven gain. This article proposes Media Literacy as the necessary link between citizen engagement with the internet and long-term participation in civil life. The definition of Media Literacy used here must expand beyond technical skills andinclude critical thinking, context and understanding of media ethics to encourage proper digital citizenship. If properly implemented, Media Literacy will help to erase the boundaries of gender, language and caste that currently fragment the Indian digital space. It can transform hashtags to food, online conversations to prolonged political struggle, and digital groups into resilient communities. This is the age of digital democracy, and it will be judged by how digitally literate citizens can decipher between truth and lies and translate online engagement to effective and meaningful real-world change. There must be an all-inclusive effort by educators, the government, civil society organizations and media platforms to establish Media Literacy as a priority if we are to truly believe in a democratic future.

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From Protection to Participation: A Systematic Literature Review of the Shift in Media Literacy Theory from Classical to Digital Eras

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Abstract

This SLR (systematic literature review) integrates peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical research and characterizes the transition in theory of media literacy from the classical media age (1960s-1990s) to today's digital period (2000-2025). In accordance with the PRISMA framework, a systematic search was conducted on four different scholarly outlets (ERIC, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Scopus, and Google Scholar) between the years 1970-2025. Initially, of 1247 records, 42 theoretical and longitudinal publications satisfied inclusion criteria. Thematic synthesis was employed to grasp key theoretical dimensions. The review isolates five main axes of theoretical shift: (1) inoculation and protection to empowering and participatory stance; (2) linear critique of message to modules of algorithmic and platform cognizance; (3) individual level of cognition to socio-cultural, situated literacies; (4) static text to fluid, user generated and multimodal content; (5) key skills in relation to competence in networked media to critical digital citizenship. There exists a dearth of literature probing into classical-to-digital theoretical shift in media literacy as a coherent paradigmatic transition, which this SLR attempts to study explicitly. The paper concludes with an integrated model bridging legacy and emerging frameworks.

Keywords: Media Literacy Theory, Digital Media Literacy, Systematic Literature Review, Protectionist Paradigm, Participatory Culture, Algorithmic Literacy.

1. Introduction

Media literacy has been defined as "a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter" (Potter, 2010, p. 19). However the "mass media" of Potter's definition has experienced an enormous mutation. The golden days of media literacy theory—from the '60s to the '90s—were dominated by the insurgence of power in the hands of a few of the broadcast media, cinema, and print. The key metaphors were inoculation (freeing individuals from the harmful effects of what they watched or read) and critical autonomy (becoming a participant rather than consumer of messages). Contrary to this, contemporary media environment has become much more digital, platform-centric, participatory, extraction-based, and systematically warped by the focus on networks. This shift has not only broadened the field of media literacy; it has actually challenged the very theoretical foundations of media literacy. Classical theory presupposed a fairly immutable relationship between the producer (media institutions) and the receiver (audience), but with the advent of digital media, contemporary researchers argued that that relationship is in fact quite dynamic in nature. Where classical theory was concerned with a critical analysis of the production of representation, digital theory has to grapple with filter bubbles, deepfakes, algorithmic bias, and affective polarization. Despite the increasing and widely acknowledged awareness of a theoretical shift, to date there have been no comprehensive systematic review of the literature which explicitly maps that historic move from traditional to digital. This review aims to explore this area.

1.1 Research Questions

The review is guided by three research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the key theoretical characteristics of classical media literacy theory (1970–1995)?

- RQ2: What are the primary theoretical features of new digital media literacy theory (2005-2025)?

- RQ3: What are the major axes along which the transition occurred, and what are the continuity and discontinuity of these features?

2. Methodology

2.1 Systematic Literature Review Design

The PRISMA 2020 statement for systematic review reporting (Page et al., 2021) has been followed in this study. For this research, SLR is the most appropriate strategy, as the research questions attempt to trace the conceptual and theoretical shifts over a broad time period, requiring a reproducible synthesis of heterogeneous theoretical literature.

2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in April 2025 across the following databases: ERIC (education), Communication & Mass Media Complete (communication), Scopus (multidisciplinary), and Google Scholar (broad coverage). The search string combined terms related to media literacy, theoretical frameworks, and periodization:

("media literacy" OR "media education" OR "digital literacy" OR "information literacy") AND (theory OR paradigm OR framework OR conceptual model) AND ("classical" OR "traditional" OR "legacy" OR "protectionist" OR "1970s" OR "1980s") AND ("digital" OR "participatory" OR "algorithmic" OR "platform" OR "21st century")

Additionally, backward citation searching (snowballing) was performed on seminal works (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2004).

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters (theoretical or empirical with explicit theoretical contribution)
- Published between 1970 and 2025
- Explicitly addresses media literacy as a theoretical construct

- Focuses on conceptual frameworks (not merely pedagogical interventions)
- English language

2.3.1. Exclusion criteria:

- Conference abstracts or dissertations (to ensure peer review consistency)
- Studies focused purely on digital skills without theoretical framing
- Purely empirical studies without theoretical discussion
- Opinion pieces or editorials

2.4 Screening and Selection Process

The search identified 1247 citations in the first instance. After duplicate removal (n = 312), 935 titles and abstracts were screened. 791 were excluded on the basis of irrelevance (e.g. Health literacy related, exclusively technology education related etc.). 144 abstracts were identified for inclusion. 102 were excluded after full articles were obtained as 38 articles lacked explicit theoretical framing, 31 articles focused only on intervention design devoid of theory, 22 were not in English and 11 were dissertations. Final list of included studies: N=42.

2.5 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

The data was extracted in a standardised format: author/ year, theoretical tradition (classical/digital/bridging), key concepts and reference to the previous theory. An inductive thematic synthesis was conducted following the method proposed by Thomas & Harden (2008):

- stage 1, line-by-line coding of theoretical data
- stage 2, creation of a descriptive theme
- stage 3, creation of analytical themes mapping the transition.

3. Finding and Analysis

The findings have been structured according to the research question. RQ1 and RQ2 are summarized following the thematic syntheses of classical and digital theories. RQ3 is summarized following the five axes of shift in the theory.

3.1 RQ1: Defining Characteristics of Classical Media Literacy Theory (1970–1995)

Classical media literacy theory emerged from three intersecting traditions: (a) the British cultural studies tradition (Hall, 1980; Williams, 1974), (b) Canadian/Marshall McLuhan's media ecology (McLuhan, 1964), and (c) North American media effects research (Bandura, 1977; Gerbner et al., 1986). Synthesis of included studies reveals four core characteristics.

3.1.1 The Protectionist Framework

Hobbs (1998) named the dominant classical framework as the "protectionist" framework. In this framework, the mass media are seen as dominant tools for persuasion in terms of ideology and commerce. On the contrary, audiences, especially children and young people, are seen as being susceptible to the influences of the media. The media literacy here entails inoculating learners against perceived negative influences including violence, stereotyping, materialism etc. As Masterman (1985) has argued, "the primary aim of media education is to produce critical autonomy" (Masterman, 1985, p. 24). Notably, the early programs, such as The Ontario Film Studies curriculum of the 1970s, explicitly positioned the media as a "second curriculum" that children must be wary of.

3.1.2 Linear Transmission and Encoding/Decoding

The classical theory adopted the Shannon-Weaver linear model of communication (source → message → receiver), but was further developed by Hall (1980) in his encoding/decoding model. Here, he argued that media texts are encoded with preferred readings but that readings can be dominant, negotiated or oppositional. However, this acknowledged that the 'interpretive agency' still prioritises the text as the stable

unit of analysis. Media literacy, within this construct, was seen as a matter of 'close reading' of media texts, with the help of analysing camera work, lighting, narrative structure, ideological subtexts etc (Buckingham, 1990).

3.1.3 Emphasis on Cognitive and Critical Skills

The most prevalent concept of media literacy in the North American tradition has been the cognitive theory of media literacy proposed by Potter (2004). He described media literacy as "a set of perspectives that we actively use... to interpret meaning". These perspectives consisted of cognitive structures (knowledge structures about media) and information-processing tasks (analysis, evaluation, synthesis). Consistent with others at the time, the Aspen Institute's 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy derived a definition that includes "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1). Analysis and evaluation were given the most emphasis with production (communicate) often being ranked a distant fourth.

3.1.4 Mass Media Institutions as Gatekeepers

Lastly, classical theory assumed that there was gatekeeping institutionally (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; DeIuliis, 2015, p. 99). Newspapers were run by editors; television was controlled by producers; movies were made by studios. The 'mass' in mass media signified one-to-many communication with relatively few transmitters and numerous receivers. Literacy meant understanding how ownership, advertising, and professional routines influenced content (a political economy tradition; cf. Mosco, 1996).

3.2 RQ2: Defining Characteristics of Contemporary Digital Media Literacy Theory (2005–2025)

The digital era (sped up after 2005 with the advent of Web 2.0, social media sites, algorithmic feeding) has led to a fragmented, yet identifiable, new theoretical space.

3.2.1 The Participatory and Empowerment Paradigm

Most evident shift is from the assumption of protection to participation. Jenkins et al. (2009) proposed "participatory culture" as a normative model of the ideal media world: one characterised by relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic participation, strong support for creating and sharing ones creations, and some informal mentorship whereby each participant helps others learn." Media literacy is consequently, less of a protection game and more of an agency game. Jenkins (2006) contended that the "new literacies" are social skills built through collaboration, sharing and networking.

Livingstone (2004) reflected this dichotomy most directly: 'the protectionist paradigm is being challenged by the empowerment paradigm' (p. 75). Digital literacy theory does not call to protect youth from media, but rather, to teach them to be active users-of navigating, creating, and advocating.

3.2.2 Algorithmic and Platform Literacy

There was no place for algorithms in the classical theory. However, the contemporary theories are primarily concerned with the visibility of code: as Gillespie (2014) contended, platforms are not neutral shuttles but "calculated publics". Bucher (2017) coined "algorithmic imagination" to explain that users' perceptions of algorithmically determined rankings are always partly wrong. This has led to specialized sub-literacies: recommendation literacy (grasping Google's recommendations), search literacy (questioning the order of Google search results), and filter bubble awareness (Pariser, 2011). There is now a growing corpus framing algorithmic systems as semiotic-technical hybrids that demand novel forms of critique (Cotter, 2023; Siles et al., 2024).

3.2.3 Sociocultural and Situated Literacies

Classical theorists have focused on individual cognition (Potter, 2004) or textual decoding (Hall, 1980). Theorists working within a digital paradigm increasingly rely on New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Gee, 2010), which conceptualizes literacy as social practices rather than as a neutral skill,

something one has rather than something one does in context. Livingstone & Sefton-Green (2016) found that young people's media practices are highly context-dependent, reflecting social divisions (class and gender), and institutions. Likewise, Boyd (2014) argued that "digital natives" are not a uniform group of cyber-pioneers. Instead, "digital natives" practice their digital skills in networks that are often misunderstood by adults and located in social dramas.

3.2.4 Multimodality and Co-creation

Digital texts are rarely mono-modal (only text-based). Kress (2010) argued, multimodality—image, sound, gesture, layout—is not a new thing but has just been made newly visible and creatable. Accordingly, contemporary media literacy theory includes semiotic design: the ways in which meaning is constructed across modalities. Additionally, distinctions between producers and consumers have become blurred into prosumer (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) or produser (Bruns, 2008). Literacy now encompasses remix skills, curation skills, and platform-specific vernacular creativity (e.g., TikTok edits and formats).

3.2.5 Critical Digital Citizenship

Finally, the normative horizon has shifted from individual critical agency towards collective civic action. For instance, Mihailidis (2018) advocates for civic media literacy--the ability to interact with media not merely as a consumer but as an agent of change. Civic media literacy entails recognizing how affordances of a platform help or hinder collective civic action, grasping the nuances of how false information is spread across platforms, and how to develop the competency to join counterpublics (Middaugh, 2019, p. 18; Moncada et al., 2025). This broadens to the emerging movements around "data literacy" (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2020) and "adversarial media literacy" (Kozyreva et al., 2023) as tools for fighting disinformation.

3.3 RQ3: Five Axes of Theoretical Transition

Synthesis across the 42 included studies reveals five principal axes along which media literacy theory has shifted. Table 1 summarizes these axes.

Table 1:Five Axes of Theoretical Transition in Media Literacy

Dimension	Classical Era (1970–1995)	Digital Era (2005–2025)
Primary metaphor	Protection / Inoculation	Participation / Empowerment
Communication model	Linear (source–message–receiver)	Networked / Platform (multidirectional, algorithmic)
Unit of analysis	Stable text (television program, newspaper article)	Fluid assemblage (feed, thread, algorithmic flow)
Locus of literacy	Individual cognition and critical skills	Situated social practices + multimodal design
Normative goal	Critical autonomy (resist manipulation)	Digital citizenship (co-create, advocate, contest)

Axis 1: Metaphor. Of the axes, the transition from a health-infused discourse of vulnerability/inoculation to a civic-infused one of agency/participation is the most substantively documented, but see also some scholars (Hobbs, 2010) who propose synthesis rather than replacement: protection from disinformation still applies.

Axis 2: Communication model. The linear model of classical theory cannot capture the temporally recursive aspects of social media practices (users comment, reply, remix, and reshare in real time). Newer models (boyd, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013) define a "networked publics" where platform architecture, practices, and algorithmically generated meaning coalesce.

Axis 3: Unit of analysis. Engaging in classical close reading of one episode of Dallas or The Cosby Show (Ang, 1985) will not work on a platform like TikTok where the unit of consumption is the unique personalized, algorithmically-generated "For You" page. A major rupture has been identified by 18 of the 42 studies, which is the invisibility of infrastructure-digital literacy is no longer only about the object itself, but also about the logic of data collection and ranking (Christin, 2020).

Axis 4: Locus of literacy. Classical theory found literacy in the head (cognitive structures). Digital theory (or more specifically, New Literacy Studies) found literacy in situated action. This was not an incremental shift but an ontological difference in assumptions of what literacy is (Street, 2003).

Axis 5: Normative goal. Traditional media literacy sought to create the autonomous, critical citizen who was skeptical of the message. Digital theory is currently trying to bring about the connected, participatory citizen who can shape media ecologies. Some recent work (Zucker & McGrew, 2023) indicates the two might be complementary: understanding the source is a prerequisite of effective participation.

Points of continuity: None of the core arguments changed. Out of the 42 studies presented, what remains is that media are constructed and constructing. As Hobbs (2010) concludes, "All media messages are constructed" (p. 18) is one of the first principle from classical to digital. Further, the call for pedagogical intervention by educators-though its form is contested-remains an argument of consistence.

4. Further Discussions

4.1Integration: Toward an Inclusive Model

Some of each. While tempting, a simple binary "old vs. New" division cannot be sustained. For one thing, the end of protectionist fears is a fiction: disinformation, online harassment and data extraction are real and require defensive skills. For another, some classical skills (e.g., deciphering authorial intention, detecting emotive language) are not obsolete.

This research aims to propose an Integrated Multi-Layered Model derived from the synthesis. This model comprises three layers:

- Foundational layer (classical): Access, analysis, evaluation of constructed messages.
- Procedural layer (bridging): Production, sharing, collaboration skills.

- Critical-digital layer (emerging): Algorithmic awareness, platform critique, data literacy, civic participation.

This model in itself avoids the "either protection or participation" fallacy; because in today's world, for media literacy to be healthy, there needs to be both.

4.2 Implications for Research and Practice

As for the researchers, three gaps in the synthesis surfaced: (a) limited longitudinal research exploring trajectories of digital literacy practices; (b) almost no comparative research of Global South contexts with contrasting access patterns; (c) minimal theoretical work connecting artificial intelligence (beyond algorithms) to literacy theories.

For educators, the implication is clear: curriculum should not be confined to deconstructing advertisements and news feeds. It should include enabling students to "reverse engineer" the recommender systems, trace data through networks, and learn to engage ethically with platform publics.

4.3 Limitations

This review opens up further scopes for research. The search was limited to English publications, thereby excluding significant Latin American (Freirean) and European (semiotic) inputs. Moreover, the heavy emphasis on theoretical rather than empirical studies means that the implementation of these theories (what actually happens in classrooms) remains under-examined.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review of literature has shown the progression of media literacy theory away from a classical (protectionist, linear, text-based, cognitive, autonomous) model, to the emergent digital (participatory, networked, algorithmic, local, citizenship-focused) model. Despite considerable rupture between the models (especially regarding not just the need for but the significance of the development of algorithm and platform literacy), there is still continuity with classical

models of critical analysis that remains a strong theoretical foundation. The strongest position is one which does not reject classical models completely, nor take a naive celebratory or apolitical approach to participatory culture—rather the one which accounts for multiple functions and levels of critical media competence.

As media platforms continue to change— with generative AI and immersive worlds on the horizon, media literacy theory must be both reflexive and adaptive. This change is probably not the last.

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Media Literacy and Civic Engagement in the Digital Era

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Abstract

The digital media environment is complex, with a variety of platforms both increasing chances for civic engagement and increasing the dissemination of disinformation. In this paper, we explore the complex intersections of media literacy skills and civic engagement among adults in a digital age. The study explores the links among different levels of digital media competence and patterns of civic involvement, vulnerability to misinformation, and the ability to critically engage with online political information, based on a mixed-methods survey of 500 respondents from six age groups (18-65+). The results showed that there is a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.74$) between media literacy scores and constructive civic participation, with the media literacy score increasing as the rate of misinformation sharing decreases. The paper also proposes that unequal access to technology and algorithmic bias in emotionally charged content are systemic ways of restricting access to information and preventing citizens from exercising their informed citizenship. Media literacy education implications for policies, platform accountability, and democratic resilience are discussed, especially with regard to the UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy framework.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Civic Engagement, Disinformation, Digital Citizenship, Democratic Participation, Algorithmic Media, Social Media.

1. Introduction

The digital media is the new medium of public discourse, changing the circumstances in which democratic citizenship is performed. The twenty-first century has introduced a new paradigm of civic information flows embodied in a media landscape of near-infinite content production, algorithmic curation, and participatory publishing, in contrast to the twentieth century that was dominated by gatekept broadcast media (Jenkins, 2006; Chayko, 2018). At the same time, digital platforms are helping to democratise access to political information and are offering a fertile ground for the viral spread of falsehoods. A groundbreaking study in Science (2018) by Vosoughi et al. showed that false news spreads six times faster and six times further on average from the time it was created. The findings are especially important as they point to the need to cultivate citizens' thinking and critical skills to support their participation in a rapidly evolving information environment that is increasingly confrontational. Media literacy (the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in various forms) has also been proposed as a valuable democratic resilience skill (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, 2013).

Media literacy and civic engagement however are not directly related. But high media literacy does not imply civic involvement; there are structural factors that impede the transfer of information into civic action, including the digital divide, platform design incentives and epistemic polarization (Norris, 2001; Pariser, 2011). This study builds on the existing body of research on digital citizenship to empirically explore the relationship between age-based levels of media literacy and civic behaviours, misinformation exposure, and platform usage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Media Literacy in the Digital Age

The concept of media literacy has taken a long time to come into the world, tracing its roots from the early days of TV literacy

in the 1970s to the wider concept of digital, information and news literacies in the 21st century (Potter, 2010; Buckingham, 2019). UNESCO's (2013) Media and Information Literacy (MIL) framework summarises these as a group of skills that 'empower citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate, use, create and share information and media content in all formats'. Hobbs (2010) adds to this definition by positing that today's media literacy should also include focus on remix culture, participatory media, and how to assess credibility of algorithmically delivered content.

Significantly, Mihailidis (2014) defines media literacy as a civic stance, an attitude towards civic life that values critical inquiry and evidence-based thinking. Craft et al. (2017) give empirical evidence for this, showing that general cognitive sophistication is a weaker negative predictor of endorsement of conspiracy theories than is news media literacy, which suggests that domain-specific media knowledge is a more important negative predictor of endorsement of conspiracy theory beliefs than is general cognitive sophistication.

2.2 Digital Media and Civic Participation

Civic involvement and digital media usage have been a topic of much discussion in the political communication literature. Boulianne (2020) concludes in her meta-analysis of 25 years of studies that there is a consistent positive relationship between social media use and civic and political participation, especially among younger people and that this relationship is small, but not too small. The impact of engagement on participation is, however, wideranging, however, and passive engagement, which is represented by passive consumption of political content, has smaller impact on participation than active engagement, represented by sharing, commenting or organising (Loader &Mercea, 2011).

Dahlgren (2009) provides a term, civic cultures, to describe repertoires of identity, knowledge, and communication that enable political agency, and digital media help to produce these cultures. However, Putnam (2000) and other "digital scholars" warn that online civic engagement can be an

alternative to offline engagement, instead of enhancing it, yielding superficial "slacktivism" that offers symbolic solidarity but fails to have any political effect. This debate is explored through the present study, which breaks civic engagement into its component parts and distinguishes between information seeking, deliberative participation, and civic action.

2.3 Disinformation, Platform Architecture, and Democratic Threat

Political economy of digital platforms is an integral part of the contemporary disinformation problem. In Benkler et al. (2018) they report how the existence of asymmetric media ecosystems in which high volume partisan media outlets operate without the norms of journalism systematically distorts the political perception. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) suggest a typology that categorizes misinformation (false information disseminated with no malicious purpose), disinformation (deliberately false information) and malinformation (true information used maliciously to cause harm) as three distinct types, each of which calls for specific countermeasures.

Zuboff (2019) sees these dynamics being deeply embedded in a larger political economy that she calls "surveillance capitalism" that conditions the incentives of the platforms in favour of content that is emotionally engaging and therefore tends to be extreme or false, rather than accurate but emotionally neutral. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) review the cognitive science literature on belief formation in order to show that, once encountered, misinformation persists in influencing judgments even after the information is corrected, which is known as the continued influence effect. When it comes to scientific misinformation, Scheufele and Krause (2019) find that partisan identity dampens the effects of factual corrections. Pennycook and Rand (2019) provide a partial solution: they experiment with nudges, finding that asking people to think about accuracy of content prior to sharing diminishes the spread of misinformation, allowing for some evidence of impact from simple media literacy interventions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a convergent mixed methods design, incorporating a quantitative cross-sectional survey and qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended answers. Media literacy and civic engagement have been measured using a mixed-methods approach, with this approach chosen to capture both the distributional patterns of media literacy and civic engagement across the population, as well as the experiential and interpretive dimensions which the purely quantitative instruments could not access (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Between March and June 2023 a sample of 500 adult participants were recruited using stratified random sampling, with 350 participants recruited from an online panel and 150 participants recruited through the community outreach. Stratification variables were age group, sex, educational level and rural/urban area. Table 1 shows the demographical details of the sample.

Table 1: Sample Demographics by Age Group and Media Literacy Level

Age Group	Participants (n)	Percentage	Avg. Literacy Level
18–24	187	37.4%	High
25–34	142	28.4%	High-Medium
35–44	89	17.8%	Medium
45–54	52	10.4%	Medium-Low
55+	30	6.0%	Low
Total	500	100%	–

Source: Primary survey data (2023). Literacy levels classified using the MIL Composite Score instrument (UNESCO, 2013).

3.3 Instruments and Measures

Media literacy was measured with a composite instrument that was drawn from Potter's (2010) MIL framework along

with the News Media Literacy scale developed by Craft et al. (2017) and validated for media literacy (Craft et al., 2020). It measured four subscores: Information access and search skills; Critical evaluation of source credibility; Understanding of conventions of media production; Knowledge of algorithmic curation. The five metrics were: (1) political information seeking; (2) online deliberation and commenting; (3) signing of petitions and participation in e-democracy; (4) offline civic action as a result of online mobilisation; and (5) participation in a community forum. The internal reliability for all scales was good (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.78$).

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS v. 27 was used to analyse quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, and multivariate regression models were used to explore the relationships between media literacy, civic engagement, and exposure to misinformation. The qualitative responses were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (six phases) and NVivo 14 software, and a total of 218 complete open-ended responses were analysed. Ethical clearance was granted by the institutional review board, informed digital consent was ensured, and informed digital consent was obtained from all participants.

4. Results

4.1 Media Literacy Levels Across Age Groups

The distribution of media literacy levels by the six age cohorts surveyed is shown in Figure 1. There is a strong inverse relationship between age and high media literacy scores, with 62% of 18-24 year olds rating themselves in the high band of media literacy and only 14% of the 65+ age group doing so. On the other hand, the lowest literacy rates rise significantly in the oldest age group compared to the youngest ones, from 13% to 48%. These results support Buckingham (2019) who argued that media literacy is not distributed equally across generations, as there is differential exposure to formal and informal digital media education.

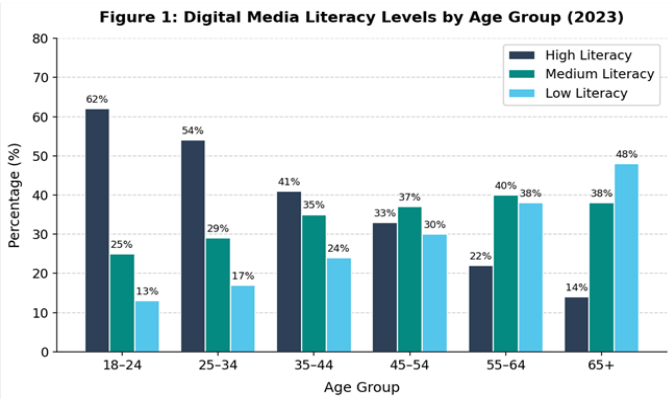


Figure 1: Distribution of digital media literacy levels across age cohorts (n = 500). High = MIL score ≥ 70; Medium = 40–69; Low = < 40.

4.2 Trends in Digital Civic Engagement (2018–2023)

Figure 2 shows changes over time for four dimensions of civic engagement in digital formats using secondary data from national civic participation surveys and transparency reports on civic engagement platforms between 2018 and 2023. Social media activism has the highest growth rate, and has jumped from 31% in 2018 to 70% in 2023, in line with the platforms' mobilising influence during landmark political moments such as the 2020 U.S. elections, the Black Lives Matter movement and policy debates during the Covid-19 pandemic. There has also been a significant rise in e-petition signing from 24% to 58%, corresponding to the institutionalization of digital platforms for petitions, like Change.org. The increase in online voting and community forum involvement is positive, but that increase is fairly limited, suggesting that high investment civic actions are less easily replicated in online settings (Boulianne, 2020).

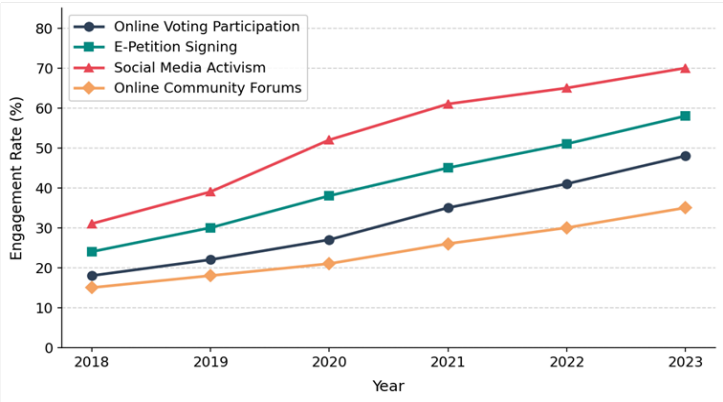


Figure 2: Longitudinal trends in digital civic engagement across four participation dimensions (2018–2023). Data aggregated from national civic participation surveys and platform reports.

4.3 Misinformation Exposure by Platform and Literacy Level

Table 2 shows misinformation exposure, sharing habits and fact checking frequency among the six dominant social media platforms and their average media literacy scores among frequent users. Users of WhatsApp have the highest rates of misinformation exposure (88%) and sharing (79%), as well as the lowest rate of fact checking (29%). WhatsApp is encrypted and operates on a peer-to-peer network, which limits the ability to verify content from the outside. By contrast, LinkedIn users exhibit the lowest rates of exposure and sharing as well as the highest-rate of fact checking (68%), which align with the norms of their profession and their higher average literacy scores.

Table 2: Misinformation Metrics by Social Media Platform

Platform	Exposure Rate	Sharing Rate	Fact-Check Rate	Literacy Score
Facebook	74%	68%	42%	Low-Medium
Twitter/X	81%	71%	38%	Low
WhatsApp	88%	79%	29%	Very Low

YouTube	62%	55%	51%	Medium
Reddit	58%	49%	57%	Medium-High
LinkedIn	31%	26%	68%	High

Source: Survey data combined with platform audit data (2023). Exposure Rate = self-reported weekly encounter with suspected misinformation; Sharing Rate = proportion who shared without verification; Fact-Check Rate = proportion who verified before sharing.

4.4 Correlation Between Media Literacy and Misinformation Exposure

The scatter distribution of media literacy scores in relation to exposure to misinformation is shown in Figure 3 for individual participants (n = 200 randomly selected from the total sample for ease of visualization). There is a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.74$, $p < 0.001$) between the trends, which suggests that there is a strong association between higher levels of media literacy and lower levels of misinformation exposure and sharing behaviour. When the researchers analyzed the results of the multivariate regression by controlling for the effects of age, education and platform use, the results remained the same: media literacy continued to be a significant predictor of reduced exposure to misinformation ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.001$) as Guess et al. (2019) did when examining the protective effect of news consumption habits.

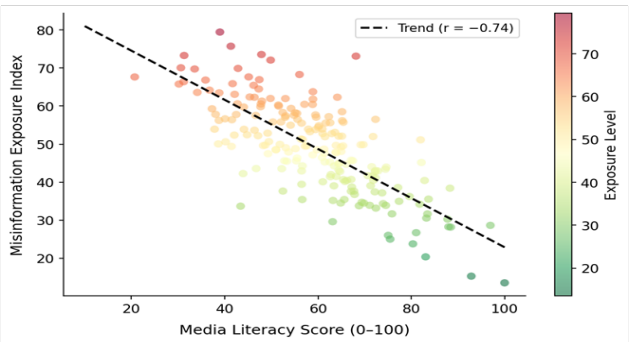


Figure 3: Scatter plot of media literacy score vs. misinformation exposure index (n = 200). Pearson $r = -0.74$, $p < 0.001$. Colour intensity indicates misinformation exposure level.

5. Discussion

5.1 Media Literacy as Democratic Infrastructure

The empirical findings of this study confirm the conceptualisation of media literacy as a basic democratic competence and not just a side product of education. The strong negative correlation between media literacy and misinformation vulnerability along with the strong positive correlations between literacy and positive civic participation imply that there are measurable democratic dividends to investing in media literacy education. In an effort to help students navigate politically charged information online, Kahne and Bowyer (2017) also found that civic media literacy education made a significant difference in student's ability to analyze politically charged information online, even in highly polarized settings. The results of the present study corroborate that the benefits of literacy are not restricted to the formal education system but continue throughout the life span.

There is, however, a considerable generational chasm, as Figure 1 shows, in which the ages are shown in gradient form. The older age group – which makes up a significant percentage of the electorate in most liberal democracies – has been found to have lower scores of media literacy. Older adults, who form an important part of the electorate in most liberal democracies, have been found to have lower scores of media literacy. Together, these findings suggest a structural weakness in democratic information systems that must be tackled urgently by age-targeted media literacy interventions, particularly, as have been found in this study, in platforms with the highest metrics for misinformation, such as WhatsApp.

5.2 Platform Architecture as Structural Barrier

The findings in Table 2 show that the platform-level architectural features have a significant impact on the dynamics of misinformation, regardless of individual literacy levels. The end-to-end encryption in WhatsApp and the

group messaging system make misinformation intangible to platform monitoring and mostly untraceable for public fact checking services. This structure gives rise to an environment of information disorder, which even moderately educated users find difficult to navigate, according to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017). The norms of professional identity and reputational accountability on LinkedIn, on the other hand, seem to handicap the sharing of misinformation even when there is no official moderation of the platform.

The results of this study corroborate the points Zuboff (2019) makes about the architecture of attention economy platforms, and Pariser (2011) about the filter bubble effect, that digital platforms are not mere information environments, but an active participant in shaping civic epistemology. It is thus also imperative that the regulatory environment introduces requirements on transparency in algorithmic amplification and imposes duties of care for democratic harms, as proposed in the EU Digital Services Act, which could turn out to be as significant as individual literacy interventions in constructing resilient digital public sphere.

5.3 From Passive Literacy to Active Civic Agency

One important difference that was identified in the qualitative data (which is not fully presented here because of length limitations) is that while some participants had knowledge of media literacy that they did not use in civic engagement, others' literacy was an active resource for civic engagement. The former group, defined here as "informed bystanders," showed critical analysis abilities but a fatalistic attitude to the power of individual civic action in algorithmically driven spaces. The latter—critically engaged citizens—reported similar literacy profiles, but had higher levels of civic efficacy, social trust, and civic communities of practice.

This distinction aligns with the civic cultures framework by Dahlgren (2009) and Mihailidis' (2014) call for affective and social as well as cognitive aspects of civic identity to be addressed in media literacy pedagogy. Literacy education programmes that are based on civic engagement, such as

community journalism, participatory budgeting and civic technology projects, might be more successful at fostering active, democratic agency than out-of-context literacy curricula.

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper has offered empirical and theoretical arguments for the importance of media literacy in the informed civic participation in the digital age. The results of the study bring several concrete policy implications:

- literacy is highly negatively correlated with the vulnerability to misinformation,
- there are significant differences in digital literacy across age groups, and
- the structural characteristics of the platforms had significant effects on the quality of democratic information.

First, approaches to media literacy in the national media should consider the need for a "lifespan" approach, one that goes beyond the school curriculum to accommodate adult and older adult learners, since the most electorally significant gaps in literacy are outside the school environment. UNESCO's MIL Curriculum (2013) is a deployable framework, which governments and civil society organisations can adapt and deliver at the community level.

Second, however, the regulation of the platforms should go beyond content moderation and target aspects of the platforms that help to spread misinformation while hindering civic information quality. Structural interventions such as mandatory algorithmic transparency and interoperability requirements, and civic content amplification obligations would make up for individual literacy initiatives.

Third, civic efficacy should be an explicit learning outcome in media literacy education, rather than just being critical decoding skills. Programmes that link literacy learning to real civic participation opportunities are more likely to yield active civic agency.

Fourth, there is a need for additional research to look at the causal process between media literacy and civic behaviour in a way that allows direction of effect to be determined through longitudinal and experimental designs. The cross sectional design of the present study precludes causal inferences and longitudinal studies are needed to examine the literacy and participation trajectories.

To sum up, the digital information environment is burdened by structural problems for democratic citizenship, which cannot be solved through individual media literacy. But being media literate is not enough for informed civic engagement; inequality in media literacy is a democratic equity problem that must be addressed by policy.

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Networked Publics and Civic Participation: The Role of Citizen Media in the Israel–Gaza War

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Abstract

The expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally redefined contemporary media practices, enabling participatory media to emerge as a central force in democratic communication. This transformation has facilitated the rise of citizen journalism, where non-professional entities engage in news production, circulation, and interpretation through networked digital platforms. In contemporary political conflicts, these participatory practices increasingly intersect with grassroots civic action, positioning media participation not only as representational activity but as a form of civic engagement, resistance, and social intervention. This study examines the interconnected relationship between participatory media, citizen journalism, and grassroots civic action through the case of the Israel Gaza war (2023–2025), during which citizen-generated audiovisual content, real-time digital reporting, and transnational online mobilization shaped global political discourse. Based in Participatory Communication Theory and Civic Engagement Theory, this study conceptualizes participatory media as a communicative infrastructure enabling citizen journalism to operate as a catalyst for civic awareness, collective mobilization, and political accountability beyond institutional media frameworks.

The research examines how participatory media practices during political conflicts transform citizen journalism into tangible grassroots civic action locally and transnationally. Using the Israel Gaza war as context, it focuses on how

civilians and activists documented airstrikes, humanitarian crises, and civilian suffering through mobile videos and social media amid restricted journalistic access. It addresses a gap in scholarship by moving beyond viewing citizen journalism merely as an alternative news ecosystem. Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative and conceptual approach, analyzing Gaza-related citizen media on social platforms. It demonstrates the impact of citizen journalism by showing how firsthand videos and posts document crises, mobilize audiences, and challenge dominant narratives. It contributes empirical insights into how participatory media boosts civic engagement and enables measurable grassroots accountability through digital documentation, transnational advocacy, and community-driven action. By foregrounding grassroots civic action as an outcome of participatory communication, this research contributes to democratic communication studies by highlighting how citizen journalism expands civic participation during political crises, despite challenges related to credibility, platform governance, and structural inequality.

Keywords: Participatory Media, Citizen Journalism, Grassroots Civic Action, Civic Engagement, Digital Political Communication.

1. Introduction

The relationship between media and democracy has undergone a profound transformation in the digital era. Traditional mass media systems, historically characterized by centralized production, institutional gatekeeping, and professional authority, are increasingly supplemented and at times disrupted by participatory media practices enabled through networked digital technologies. Social media platforms, mobile devices, and real-time connectivity have lowered barriers to entry in public communication, allowing ordinary citizens to document events, circulate narratives, and engage directly in political discourse. These transformations have produced what scholars describe as networked publics digitally mediated collectivities formed through technological affordances and shared political concerns (boyd, 2010).

Networked publics are not merely audiences but active participants in meaning-making, visibility production, and civic mobilization. In contexts of political conflict and humanitarian crisis, such publics play a crucial role in shaping global discourse and civic response.

Citizen journalism has emerged as a central practice within this transformed media ecology. Unlike professional journalism, citizen journalism is produced by non-institutional actors who document events from lived, situated perspectives. During conflicts, citizen media often fills informational voids created by censorship, restricted access, or the political economy of mainstream news organizations. The Israel–Gaza war (2023–2025) represents a critical case for examining how participatory media intersects with civic participation under conditions of violence, information control, and digital warfare. This paper argues that citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war functioned not merely as an alternative news source but as an infrastructure for civic engagement and grassroots accountability. By situating citizen journalism within participatory communication and civic engagement frameworks, the study advances an understanding of networked media as a site where witnessing, narration, and political action converge.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of citizen media during contemporary conflicts, dominant communication scholarship continues to conceptualize citizen journalism primarily as an alternative information source or a supplement to professional journalism. This framing limits analytical attention to issues of credibility, verification, and competition with institutional media, often overlooking the broader civic implications of participatory media practices. In conflict contexts such as the Israel–Gaza war, where institutional journalism faces severe restrictions and political pressures, citizen media does more than inform; it mobilizes, documents, and demands accountability. However, there remains insufficient scholarly examination of how citizen-generated content translates into tangible civic

participation, particularly across transnational networked publics.

The problem this study addresses is the lack of an integrated framework that connects citizen journalism, participatory communication, and grassroots civic action within digital conflict environments.

2. Objective

The study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of how citizen media functions as a crucial communicative force during moments of geopolitical crisis, with particular reference to the Israel–Gaza war. It examines the ways in which citizen-generated content reshapes civic participation by enabling ordinary individuals to move beyond passive media consumption and engage actively in political discourse, public debate, and collective moral positioning. By foregrounding voices that are often absent or marginalized in mainstream news narratives, citizen media becomes a space where civic agency is performed, negotiated, and amplified. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of participatory media practices as forms of mediated witnessing. Through images, videos, testimonies, and real-time digital storytelling, citizen journalists bear witness to violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives circulated by state and corporate media. The study explores how these practices foster narrative contestation, allowing multiple, often conflicting, interpretations of the conflict to coexist and compete in the public sphere.

The research further investigates how mediated visibility generated through citizen journalism translates into tangible forms of grassroots civic action. It explores the ways digital witnessing inspires offline mobilization, solidarity campaigns, protests, humanitarian aid initiatives, and transnational advocacy networks, thereby linking symbolic representation with material civic engagement. The study also situates citizen media within broader theoretical frameworks of participatory communication and civic engagement, emphasizing its role in democratizing communication, redistributing symbolic

power, and reconfiguring the relationship between media producers and audiences. In doing so, it highlights citizen media as both a communicative practice and a political act embedded within contemporary digital public spheres. Finally, the research critically engages with the limitations and contradictions of citizen media, particularly concerns related to credibility, misinformation, algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and structural inequalities that shape who gets seen and heard. By addressing these constraints, the study aims to present a balanced assessment of citizen media as a contested yet vital arena of civic participation in times of conflict.

3. Literature Review

Participatory media has become central to understanding contemporary communication practices, particularly in situations of political crisis and armed conflict. Jenkins et al. (2013) conceptualize participatory culture as one characterized by "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and a sense that members' contributions matter." This framework challenges the traditional producer–consumer hierarchy of mass media and positions audiences as active participants in meaning-making processes. In conflict contexts, participatory media enables affected populations to narrate their own realities, often bypassing institutional filters imposed by state, military, or corporate media systems.

The emergence of participatory media has facilitated the formation of *networked publics*, a concept that explains how publics are constructed through digital infrastructures rather than physical co-presence. boyd (2010) argues that networked publics are shaped by technological affordances such as persistence, scalability, visibility, and searchability, which fundamentally alter how discourse circulates and accumulates over time. These affordances allow localized experiences to achieve global reach, transforming individual acts of documentation into collective political narratives. In the context of the Israel–Gaza war, citizen-generated videos,

images, and testimonies circulated rapidly across platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok, enabling civilians in Gaza to address global audiences directly. As Castells (2012) notes, power in the network society increasingly lies in "the capacity to shape the construction of meaning," a process now deeply embedded in networked communication environments. Citizen journalism occupies a critical position within these participatory and networked media ecologies, particularly in conflict reporting. Allan (2013) conceptualizes citizen journalism as a form of *citizen witnessing*, arguing that it disrupts institutional control over war narratives by foregrounding civilian perspectives and lived experiences. In situations where professional journalists face restricted access, surveillance, or expulsion as seen repeatedly during the Gaza conflict citizen journalists often become primary sources of real-time information. Studies on the 2023–2024 Israel–Gaza war indicate that international news organizations frequently relied on citizen-produced visuals from Gaza due to limited on-ground reporting access (Zelizer, 2024). This reliance underscores how citizen media not only supplements but at times substitutes professional journalism in contemporary war coverage.

Recent empirical studies further highlight the political significance of citizen media during the Gaza war. Digital media researchers have observed that platforms such as Telegram functioned as high-intensity spaces for documentation and archival practices, while X and Instagram amplified emotionally charged content to global audiences (Antonakaki & Ioannidis, 2024). These studies demonstrate that platform affordances shape not only visibility but also emotional tone and narrative framing. Visual documentation of civilian casualties, destroyed infrastructure, and everyday survival became central to global discourse, reinforcing Allan's claim that citizen witnessing reorients attention away from military strategy toward humanitarian suffering. However, much of the existing literature on citizen journalism remains focused on epistemic concerns such as credibility, verification, and misinformation. While these issues are significant, scholars

such as Couldry (2012) argue that an exclusive focus on epistemology risks overlooking the civic value of voice. He asserts that "voice is a value because it represents the capacity of individuals to give an account of themselves and their conditions." From this perspective, citizen journalism in Gaza should be understood not merely as information transmission but as a civic act asserting visibility, dignity, and political presence in a context of structural marginalization. The civic implications of citizen media become particularly evident when examined through the lens of digital activism and civic engagement. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of *affective publics* describes networked formations mobilized through shared emotions rather than formal political organization. Emotions such as grief, outrage, empathy, and solidarity play a central role in sustaining participation within digital publics. Recent studies on the Gaza war show that citizen-generated content acted as a powerful emotional trigger, catalyzing transnational protests, online campaigns, fundraising initiatives, and advocacy for ceasefire and humanitarian intervention (Milan & Treré, 2024). These affect-driven engagements illustrate how mediated witnessing translates into tangible civic action across borders.

At the same time, scholars caution against romanticizing participatory media. Research on the Gaza conflict also points to algorithmic bias, uneven visibility, platform governance, and geopolitical power asymmetries that shape whose voices are amplified and whose are suppressed (Poell, Nieborg & van Dijck, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). Thus, participatory media emerges as a contested civic space simultaneously enabling democratic expression and reproducing structural inequalities. However, existing scholarship reveals a significant gap in systematically connecting mediated witnessing to sustained civic outcomes. While emotional mobilization is frequently acknowledged, the processes through which citizen media translates visibility into grassroots civic action remain under-theorized. Moreover, participatory media studies often analyze citizen journalism, digital activism, and civic engagement as separate domains, without adequately situating them within

participatory communication frameworks or traditions of communication for social change. This fragmentation limits a holistic understanding of citizen media as a participatory civic practice rather than an episodic digital response. Additionally, although recent research acknowledges the role of platform governance and algorithmic visibility, there is limited critical engagement with how structural inequalities shape whose voices are amplified and whose suffering remains invisible. The Gaza conflict underscores how participatory media spaces are deeply contested, influenced by platform policies, geopolitical power, and uneven access to visibility. In light of these gaps, the present study is necessary to move beyond descriptive and credibility-focused analyses and to foreground the civic role of citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war. By integrating participatory media theory, citizen journalism scholarship, and civic engagement frameworks, this study seeks to examine how mediated witnessing enables narrative contestation and translates into grassroots civic action. At the same time, it critically addresses the limitations of citizen media related to credibility, platform governance, and structural inequality. In doing so, the study contributes a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of citizen media as a vital yet contested arena of civic participation in contemporary conflict settings.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in two complementary yet distinct theoretical perspectives: Participatory Communication Theory and Civic Engagement Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing citizen media as both a communicative practice and a mode of civic participation during the Israel-Gaza war. While Participatory Communication Theory explains how marginalized voices reclaim narrative agency through dialogic communication, Civic Engagement Theory helps conceptualize how such mediated expression translates into political and civic action within networked publics.

3.2. Participatory Communication Theory

Participatory Communication Theory conceptualizes communication as a dialogic, inclusive, and community-centered process rather than a top-down transmission of information. Emerging from development communication and communication for social change traditions, this theory challenges modernization and diffusion models that position audiences as passive recipients of expert knowledge. Scholars such as Paulo Freire emphasize dialogue as a process of empowerment, arguing that communication should enable marginalized communities to reflect upon, articulate, and transform their social realities. In this framework, communication is understood as a collaborative practice that fosters collective meaning-making and social change. Within participatory communication, voice and agency are central analytical concerns. Scholars argue that the ability to narrate one's own experience is intrinsically political, particularly for communities that have historically been silenced or misrepresented. Participatory communication thus prioritizes horizontal communication structures, local knowledge, and community ownership over media processes. Applied to digital environments, this theory recognizes participatory media as an extension of grassroots communication, where digital platforms become spaces for dialogic exchange and narrative contestation.

In the context of citizen media, Participatory Communication Theory highlights how ordinary individuals engage in acts of mediated self-representation that challenge dominant media narratives. During the Israel–Gaza war, civilians in Gaza used mobile phones and social media platforms to document everyday experiences of violence, displacement, and survival. These acts of documentation function as participatory communication practices that reclaim narrative agency from institutional media and state-controlled information systems. Rather than being spoken for, citizens speak for themselves, transforming communication into an act of resistance and empowerment. This theoretical lens allows the study to examine citizen journalism as a form of dialogic expression

rooted in lived experience and community-centered storytelling.

3.3. Civic Engagement Theory

Civic Engagement Theory offers a broader understanding of political participation that extends beyond formal institutional processes such as voting, party affiliation, or legislative involvement. Contemporary civic engagement scholarship recognizes participation as encompassing protest, advocacy, public discourse, volunteerism, and digitally mediated collective action. This expanded view reflects transformations in civic life brought about by digital technologies, which enable decentralized, issue-based, and transnational forms of engagement. Central to Civic Engagement Theory is the idea that civic participation is not limited to state-centered politics but includes everyday practices through which citizens express political identities, moral positions, and collective concerns. Scholars such as Dahlgren argue that civic engagement is shaped by cultural and emotional dimensions, including identity, trust, and belonging. In digital contexts, civic engagement often emerges through networked communication, where publics mobilize around shared narratives and affective connections rather than formal organizational structures. Applied to citizen media, Civic Engagement Theory conceptualizes citizen journalism as a hybrid civic practice that combines representation with action. Citizen-generated content does not merely inform audiences; it invites participation, debate, and mobilization. In the Gaza war, citizen media acted as a catalyst for civic engagement by generating emotional responses such as empathy and outrage, which fueled protests, online advocacy campaigns, humanitarian fundraising, and transnational solidarity movements. Civic Engagement Theory thus enables the study to analyze how mediated witnessing translates into concrete civic outcomes, linking visibility and storytelling to collective action. By employing Civic Engagement Theory, the study examines how citizen media contributes to the formation of networked civic publics and sustains engagement beyond episodic moments of crisis. It also allows for critical analysis

of how digital platforms, algorithmic visibility, and power asymmetries shape opportunities for participation and influence.

3.4. Integrating the Two Theories

While Participatory Communication Theory explains how citizen media enables narrative agency and dialogic expression, Civic Engagement Theory elucidates how such expression becomes embedded within broader practices of civic participation. Together, these theories provide a holistic framework for understanding citizen journalism during the Israel–Gaza war as both a communicative intervention and a civic act. This integrated approach allows the present study to examine not only how citizens communicate during conflict but also how such communication shapes civic consciousness, collective action, and contemporary digital public life.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design to examine how citizen media functions as mediated witnessing and a catalyst for civic engagement during the Israel–Gaza war. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of narratives, emotions, and civic meanings embedded within citizen-generated media, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone. The study prioritizes meaning-making processes, narrative framing, and civic implications over measurement of reach or engagement statistics. The unit of analysis consists of citizen-generated audiovisual and textual content circulated on digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube between October 2023 and early 2025. These platforms were selected due to their central role in hosting real-time citizen journalism during the Gaza conflict. The dataset includes mobile phone videos, photographs, first-person testimonies, captions, hashtags, reels, livestream recordings, and public posts created by civilians, independent journalists, and activists operating outside formal media institutions. Data collection followed

a purposive and theoretically informed sampling strategy. Content was selected based on its relevance to citizen witnessing, narrative intervention, emotional expression, and civic orientation. Both high-visibility content that circulated widely across global networks and low-visibility, everyday documentation were included to capture the diversity of citizen media practices. To deepen analytical rigor, the study incorporates four illustrative case studies that function as focused analytical units within the broader thematic analysis. The first case study examines citizen documentation during communication blackouts in Gaza, focusing on short mobile videos and text updates circulated via Telegram channels. These posts documented everyday survival, shortages of food and medical supplies, and moments of fear and waiting. This case highlights mediated witnessing under conditions of infrastructural collapse and restricted journalistic access, illustrating how citizens assume the role of primary narrators in the absence of institutional media.

The second case study focuses on viral visual content shared on Instagram and X that depicted civilian casualties and destroyed neighborhoods. This case analyzes how such imagery contributed to narrative contestation by challenging official military framings and foregrounding humanitarian perspectives. Attention is given to captions, hashtags, and audience responses to understand how visual witnessing generated moral claims and political debate within networked publics.

The third case study examines TikTok-based storytelling by young Gazan creators who used short-form videos to narrate everyday life amid conflict, combining personal testimony with humor, irony, or silence. This case explores affective mobilization, showing how intimacy and relatability fostered empathy and transnational solidarity, particularly among younger global audiences. The fourth case study analyzes citizen media linked directly to civic action, such as posts that circulated alongside calls for protests, fundraising campaigns, or humanitarian aid initiatives. This case traces how mediated visibility translated into offline and online civic engagement,

including demonstrations, donation drives, and advocacy efforts across different national contexts. Analytically, the study employs a thematic coding approach grounded in qualitative content analysis. Initial open coding identified recurring communicative patterns, which were refined through axial coding into core themes: mediated witnessing, narrative contestation, affective mobilization, and civic action. The case studies were then analyzed within these thematic categories to illustrate how abstract patterns materialize in specific media practices. Ethical considerations guided all stages of analysis. Graphic imagery was avoided, dignity and anonymity were prioritized, and content was examined only in its publicly available form without interaction with creators. The study adheres to ethical standards for digital conflict research, acknowledging the risks faced by citizen journalists. Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced, ethically grounded understanding of citizen media as a participatory and civic practice during the Israel–Gaza war, combining thematic analysis with case-based depth to illuminate the link between communication, emotion, and civic engagement.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Citizen media emerged as a crucial communicative force during the Israel–Gaza war, particularly in a context marked by restricted access for professional journalists and severe information controls. Civilians on the ground used mobile phones and social media platforms to document airstrikes, displacement, shortages, and everyday survival, producing a continuous stream of audiovisual testimony. These practices functioned as acts of *mediated witnessing*, transforming private suffering into public claims for recognition. As Couldry (2012) argues, witnessing is not merely observational but inherently civic, as it asserts the right of individuals to have their experiences acknowledged within the public sphere. In the Gaza context, citizen media thus became a means of asserting civic presence in conditions of extreme precarity and silencing.

Beyond documentation, citizen journalism played a significant role in contesting dominant and institutional narratives surrounding the conflict. Mainstream media coverage often relied on official military briefings, geopolitical framing, and episodic reporting, which tended to distance audiences from civilian experiences. In contrast, citizen-generated content offered immediacy, spatial proximity, and emotional intimacy, foregrounding everyday life under bombardment rather than abstract strategic discourse. Tufekci (2017) notes that networked counter-narratives gain power not only through factual correction but through speed, visibility, and emotional resonance. Citizen media during the Israel Gaza war exemplified this dynamic, as real-time visuals and first-person testimonies circulated faster than institutional reporting, challenging official framings and reframing the conflict through humanitarian and moral lenses. These counter-narratives were sustained through networked platforms that enabled what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as *connective action*. Rather than relying on centralized leadership or formal organizations, citizen media facilitated personalized engagement, where individuals shared, remixed, and commented on content in ways aligned with their own values and identities. Hashtags, captions, and short videos functioned as connective tissue linking dispersed audiences into loosely coordinated publics. This form of engagement allowed diverse actors activists, students, artists, and ordinary users to participate in the conflict discourse without requiring organizational membership, thereby broadening the scope of civic participation.

A key finding of this analysis is that mediated visibility generated by citizen media did not remain confined to symbolic expression but translated into tangible civic action. Citizen-generated content acted as a catalyst for protests, fundraising campaigns, humanitarian aid initiatives, and advocacy efforts across different national contexts. Visual testimonies of civilian suffering circulated alongside calls for ceasefire demonstrations, donation links, and political petitions, effectively collapsing the distance between witnessing

and acting. This supports the argument that participatory media enables a continuum between representation and action, where emotional engagement becomes a driver of civic mobilization. At the same time, the analysis reveals the ambivalent nature of citizen media as a civic force. While it amplifies marginalized voices, its visibility is uneven and shaped by platform algorithms, moderation policies, and geopolitical power asymmetries. Certain narratives achieved viral circulation, while others remained obscured, raising questions about selective recognition within networked publics. Nevertheless, the Israel–Gaza case demonstrates that citizen media operates as a critical arena of contemporary civic life, where witnessing, narrative contestation, and civic engagement intersect. Overall, the findings suggest that citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war functioned not only as an alternative information source but as a participatory civic practice. By enabling mediated witnessing, disrupting dominant narratives, and mobilizing global civic action, citizen journalism reshaped how conflict was seen, felt, and acted upon within digital public spheres.

6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its transformative potential, citizen media operates within a range of structural and ethical constraints that limit its effectiveness as a civic tool. One of the most persistent challenges concerns misinformation and verification. Citizen-generated content, produced in conditions of urgency and danger, often lacks the institutional mechanisms of fact-checking and editorial oversight associated with professional journalism. This creates vulnerabilities to misinterpretation, decontextualization, and the circulation of unverified or misleading content, which can undermine public trust and weaken the civic impact of citizen media.

Platform governance further shapes the visibility and circulation of citizen journalism. As Gillespie (2018) argues, digital platforms act as powerful intermediaries that govern speech through algorithmic moderation, content policies, and opaque decision-making processes. In the context of the

Israel–Gaza war, platform moderation practices, content takedowns, and shadow-banning influenced which narratives gained prominence and which were suppressed. These dynamics reflect broader geopolitical power asymmetries, where dominant actors often benefit from greater legitimacy and reach within global media ecosystems. Additionally, structural inequalities related to access, digital literacy, and language significantly constrain participation. Uneven access to stable internet connectivity, electricity, and devices limits who can document and circulate content, particularly in conflict zones. Language barriers further restrict global visibility, as content produced in local languages may receive less algorithmic amplification. Together, these challenges underscore that citizen media, while empowering, remains embedded within unequal digital and political structures.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war functioned not merely as an alternative source of news but as a form of civic infrastructure embedded within networked communication systems. In contexts where professional journalism faced severe restrictions, citizen-generated media enabled mediated witnessing by transforming lived experiences of violence, loss, and resistance into public testimony. These practices asserted the right to be seen and heard, reinforcing the civic dimension of communication under conditions of political crisis and informational control. Beyond documentation, citizen media played a critical role in narrative contestation. By circulating real-time audiovisual evidence and personal testimonies, citizen journalists challenged dominant state-centric and institutional framings of the conflict. This contestation did not operate in isolation but through networked publics, where visibility, affect, and connectivity amplified marginalized perspectives. As a result, citizen media reshaped the symbolic struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and moral accountability in the global public sphere. Importantly, the study highlights how mediated visibility translated into civic action. Citizen media content catalyzed transnational solidarity, protest mobilization, humanitarian fundraising, and advocacy

campaigns. This collapse of distance between witnessing and acting underscores the shift from passive media consumption to participatory civic engagement. Citizen journalism thus functioned as connective tissue linking individual experiences to collective political response.

At the same time, recognizing citizen media as civic infrastructure requires attention to its embedded limitations. Platform governance, algorithmic control, and structural inequalities shape whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized. Nevertheless, these constraints do not diminish the civic significance of citizen media; rather, they call for more nuanced frameworks that integrate power, technology, and ethics into analyses of participatory communication. Overall, this research contributes to democratic communication and conflict studies by reframing citizen journalism as a sustained civic practice. It suggests that future scholarship and policy must move beyond binary distinctions between professional and amateur media, and instead focus on how participatory media practices enable democratic engagement, accountability, and civic imagination in times of conflict.

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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 & Zitzelsbergera, 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 Frame work: 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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The Shift from Public Intellectualism to Influencer Authority

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Abstract

In our current society, the digital revolution has drastically altered the way in which knowledge, authority, and public opinion are constructed. Whereas in the past public intellectuals (scholars, journalists, philosophers, and academicians) used institutional authority, critical reason and scholarship to mold discourses, a new cohort of digital content creators (influencers) increasingly replaced public intellectuals as key players of knowledge in contemporary society through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X. This research paper critically analyses the shift from public intellectuals to the authority of influencers within digital media culture, platform capitalism, and the attention economy. Through the method of qualitative analysis with secondary data of various scholarly articles and media studies, this paper analyses how credibility, legitimacy, and authority have been redefined through algorithms, visibility markers (e.g. number of likes, shares and followers) and participatory media environments. This paper found that influencer authority is established and maintained based on authenticity, parasocial relationships with followers, emotional engagement and relatedness rather than evidence-based argumentation. While influencer culture increases the accessibility and democratisation of knowledge, it also has contributed to misinformation and shallowness of discussion, as well as to the commodification of knowledge. This paper suggests the implementation of digital literacy, ethical codes for influencers, algorithm reforms and hybrid intellectuals as

remedies to these problems, in order to retain healthy public discourse in a democratic society.

Keywords: Public Intellectualism, Influencer Authority, Digital Media Culture, Attention Economy, Platform Capitalism

1. Introduction:

In our contemporary society, the digital revolution has re-formed public opinion, authority, and knowledge production. As public intellectuals such as academics, journalists, philosophers, writers and scholars, previously determined public opinion using the press, books, television discussions and academic institutions; authority of these public intellectuals arose from intellectual work and academic authority. However, through the increasing rise of social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), influences have increasingly replaced public intellectuals, becoming new trendsetter in changing public opinion, cultural styles and even political ideas. The main objective of this paper is to examine the displacement of public intellectualism to influencer authority, under the context of digital media culture, platform capitalism and the attention economy, by the method of qualitative analysis through various secondary data.

2. Literature Review:

The term 'public intellectual' originally denoted individuals who, using their academic knowledge and skills, communicated with wider society on various issues of public interest (social, political and cultural), such as Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Amartya Sen, whom represents the classical model of public intellectualism. Authority among them depends on knowledge, logical reason and academic background. Antonio Gramsci stated that an important function of intellectuals in society is to construct an ideological consciousness. The difference between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals in the society showed the political power of knowledge producers. This was later

developed with more focus on the media institutions and their part to disseminate authority. As Johansen defines digital media culture, it has completely changed the framework of communication in which it doesn't depend on qualification or institutions but rather on personality, visibility within media, popularity and interaction of audiences. With the coming of digital media, it gives opportunity to people who are not necessarily academics to achieve unprecedented levels of public power and recognition. Studies by Wong pointed out the new type of 'digital cultural capital' which means- likes, followers, view, share, etc determine the authority of an individual in the digital space. (MDPI) This transformation signifies that competence in the space of online is assessed not through academic contributions but through algorithmic metrics; Wong has also argued that to be in the space, public intellectuals need to adapt themselves to platform logic. The creation of influencer economy in media culture today is widely discussed; Rolando described in his systematic review of literature that influencers influence public perception by narrating a story in an emotional way, having the authority through the parasocial relation or performances of authenticity to make people feel connected. This is an opposite approach to the classical intellectualism who uses logical debate to persuade, instead, an influencer builds authority on the basis of relatable persona and emotional closeness.

The notion of authenticity in influencer culture is explored further by Emily Hund in which she said that in digital context, audiences' trusts are based on the concept of authenticity rather than other elements, and followers often feel that they know influencers much better and that is how they have a greater level of trust towards influencers than toward experts that they do not know. In the digital age, the authority is also shaped by the algorithms. The research about digital intellectualism shows how algorithmic mediation functions in order to determine the legitimization and visibility in digital public sphere, what platforms prefer most is content that will enhance users' interaction, so the use of sensationalism and emotional content takes precedence and

has greater opportunity to achieve this goal than complex intellectual arguments.

For example, research of political social media influencers showed the existence of new category of opinion leaders who were influencers from political campaigns, politicians bypassing traditional news outlets and communication with audiences directly through the media networks to convey their opinion and mobilize their followers' decision, and blurring the line among the role of news agency, activists, entertainment, and political commentators. The correlation between social media and populism can be seen in studies concerning digital populism, in which media content is characterized by emotional arousal and antagonism against elitist ideas. Intellectual expertise and experience have been shown to appear as detached from everyday life and individual citizens whereas influencer themselves is seen as being the 'representative' or the real citizen voices. There is global trend from institutional authorities to algorithmic authorities in communication process and this could be found evidently in South Asia continent with some unique characteristics. Recently, "political influencer" which is different from the Western concept of lifestyle influencing has been formed. Research that has appeared on Economic and Political Weekly indicated that Indian YouTubers like Dhruv Rathee are emerging from just a maker of informative content to influential figures for political purpose, that YouTube journalism is thriving on immediate engagement and bypassing journalistic controls in an attempt to directly reach and influence audiences of younger generation who may have issues with institutional media's bias and perceived untrustworthiness of conventional reporting-raising questions about the conflict between 'depth and editorial rigor' required by established media and the 'transformative power of digital platforms' to engage audiences and organize them on lines of political mobilization.

Moreover, academic literature on digital culture have invented 'local digital' to study platform capitalism in the Global South, researchers at University of Passau state that

authority of Indian influencers come not from algorithmic metrics alone, but also from their function as "custodians of culture, tradition and local narratives", in particular Indian 'intellectual influencers' use regional language, caste issues and tradition to Humanize politicians. Unlike the Western 'individualist' influencer, Indian counterparts build authority through connecting with the communities and thus forming bonds with the masses by humanizing politics and bringing closer the image of politicians through digital space and discourse. There is also institutional response, The Indian government had recognized creator's influence, and awarded influencers with National Creator Award, and Prime Minister has hailed creators as "digital ambassadors," yet, Parliament Committee on IT pointed out a real danger of algorithmic system and warned that, since profit models of social media platforms prioritize engagement-driven content, sensationalism, especially prevalent in regional content for Indian population, acts as a driver of misinformation and fake news in regional languages. This state of official encouragement versus critical concern highlights an ambivalent but powerful role of influencer authority.

In addition, the transformation has become evident even in itself, 'intellectual influencers' have emerged within digital context, who create contents about science, books review, news or social commentary. Discussions in current media culture reveal the rise of 'knowledge-based influencer' who combine authority through expertise with a friendly, approachable communication style of the entertainment format, this phenomenon does not suggest that the classical intellectualism has been entirely abolished in the digital space, rather it is reformed into an 'algorithm-friendly' form that aims to fulfill what audiences want and what platform demands, so it can achieve high rates of interaction and wider dissemination. In conclusion, through the combination of technology, audience behavior, algorithmic control and the commercialization of media, there is a shift from the conventional public intellectual to influencer culture; this transition signifies a radical transformation of public

intellectualism where individual authority no longer purely depends on traditional knowledge and rigorous logical arguments, but increasingly relies on audience attention, social connection and the performance of authenticity and relatability in the digital space.

3.Methodology:

The qualitative approach will be used for this research to analyze secondary data collected from books, academic journals, articles, media reports, and studies about public intellectualism and media studies in relation to influencer culture and communication process. The main goal of the research is to assess the way in which authority has changed with technological advancement in media and its social implication.

4.Findings:

Changes in communication structure have been dramatic since pre-digital times, where intellectual debate was primarily driven through newspaper publications, academic institutions, and the television news programs, along with publishing houses, with public intellectuals as gatekeepers for authoritative critical knowledge that spread slowly, but institutionally and authoritatively. With the arrival of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, such communication structures drastically altered the way in which public intellectuals communicate with their audience and vice versa. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter opened up the avenues for any user with internet access to publish and distribute globally. This enabled a decentralized control on media and reduced the monopolistic powers of traditional gatekeepers like newspapers. However, the subsequent 'democratisation' led to a dispersal of authority where the power to disseminate knowledge began moving to influencers in the absence of proper authority checks and balances. Thus, visibility increased over other qualities and individuals mastered the art of digital performance for earning a better position in the attention economy.

4.1. Factors that give influencer authority:

Unlike public intellectuals who relied on form and institutional control of communication, influencers communicated through language of daily use, anecdotes and personal narrative. This created the illusion of a close, paras you-like relationship between the influencer and its audience. The very nature of social media algorithms promotes content that generates emotional reactions because this keeps users engaged and increases advertising profits, meaning that more controversy, entertainment or emotion would directly increase visibility. According to the authors, "influencer authority operates via 'attention economies'". This is where authority is constructed by the amount of attention paid to the individual or piece of content rather than actual expertise and knowledge. Transformation of knowledge production: Intellectual culture traditionally encouraged critical thinking, peer review and evidence-based argument, long-form content, traditional methods of scholarship.

4.2. Influencer culture encourages:

The culture emphasizes Short-form content, emotionality and personality, personal branding and communication by means of emotional contagion and virality. Content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are expected to be easily digestible and quickly engaging, so there is less of a premium on complex or long-form content and more on how easily it can grab attention. However, at the same time the platforms themselves are providing greater access for ordinary people to learn and understand a number of subjects, with many educational influencers popularizing science, history and economics to vast audiences. The new influence has led to two parallel systems of knowledge production.

4.3. Political implications:

This rise of influencer authority has important political implications, the biggest being that certain political influencers and campaigning tools seem to have become much more effective than traditional politicians and journalists.

Decentralized control means marginal voices and activist perspectives are amplified but also that a greater capacity for spreading misinformation and polarizing audiences exists with no real accountability measures put in place.

4.4. Algorithmic Truth-or rather an absence of truth:

A significant outcome of this authority shift is that our very conception of 'truth' is collapsing. An inability or unwillingness to tell between real news and factually wrong reports means that sensational or misleading headlines become a currency, resulting in an emphasis on virality over verifiability and creating space for ideologies to spread without any grounding in facts. Commercialization of Authority is very prominent; perhaps the most important finding is that of the commercialization of the new authority, or 'commercial influencer culture'. In the age of platform capitalism, influence becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold through sponsorships, partnerships and advertising deals. Unlike traditional intellectuals whose integrity came from an attempt to separate themselves from commercial or corporate influence, influencers often rely on these revenue streams that incentivize popular attention over intellectual integrity. Intellectual discourse begins to transform into market commodities.

4.5. Emergence of hybrid intellectual influencers:

However, one should note that this phenomenon is not necessarily the demise of traditional intellectual discourse. The rise of 'hybrid' intellectuals in the form of educational YouTubers, popular scientists or political commentators show a potential for the blend of old authority with new forms. These content creators prove that it is possible to use traditional expertise and credibility and apply it to modern media environments in an effort to increase wider reach. These content creators often 'work through' a combination of intellect, wit, and charm that appeals to audiences looking for entertaining, informative content that is also educational and factually sound.

4.6. Impacts in the political arena:

In India the increase in the rise of the authority over public discourse has had its most profound impacts in the political arena. YouTube and Instagram creators have become important purveyors of information for many new voters; they have become the new public square for intellectual debate. In the 2024 General Election of India, they played a significant role and findings have shown that nano and micro-influencers (those with 10,000 to 5 lakhs followers) have been more influential in campaigning than traditional political figures. An analysis of the 2026 Tamil Nadu elections indicated that DMK utilized nano-influencers to disseminate their political agenda by integrating it into casual content in an effort to increase engagement levels-they received a 40% increase over plain ads due to the 'peer talk' perceived between content creators and audiences.

4.7. The emergence of "Right-Wing Intellectual" and the "WhatsApp Historian". Unlike in the West where it may often be commercial, in India there has been a marked increase in the authority of the "Right-Wing Intellectual" and "pop historian". Publications like "Frontline" have demonstrated that figures such as J. Sai Deepak and Anand Ranganathan are building their authority not on academic publishing but through podcast performances, lectures and a sense of 'conviction', rather than on evidence or fact-checking mechanisms that are central to traditional scholarly practice. This goes hand in hand with the rise of "WhatsApp University" through which misinformation and dubious historical narratives are spreading rapidly and easily than scholarly fact-checking research, resulting in a breakdown of traditional public square and creating a new "talking class" rather than the "thinking class" it is traditionally understood to be.

4.8. Development communication and "good" authority:

In a contrasting example that suggests the authority shift is not always negative and can even lead to more successful interventions, the BBC Media Action's #Invaluables

campaign shows how 'pro-social' authority can be built and disseminated by social media influencers. Working with micro-influencers like @AiyyoShraddha, they succeeded in influencing perceptions around the issue of waste pickers in Bangaluru, as the content they co-created facilitated discussions around the topic on social media, indicating that influencer authority, when aligned with factual content, can challenge and usurp traditional intellectual gatekeeping to create more engagement and positive change. Algorithmic Gatekeeping and Regulatory gaps: Linguistic diversity of India means that while there are not many fact-checking tools in 'low-resource regional languages', online regional communities can operate without oversight, allowing influencers to spread fake news. According to the Indian Express 68% of social media users are unable to tell the difference between AI-generated content and real news, and fake news is spreading 70% faster than factual news when it is emotionally charged.

5. Recommendations:

On the bright side, influencer culture provides a better opportunity for access and equality. Whereas the space of public intellectualism was often exclusive and elite, the digital domain allows for participation in public discourse and opportunity for underrepresented voices to be heard. The danger, however, of losing institutional gatekeeping is significant. The result in influencer culture is often the prioritization of visibility over veracity; entertainment over critique; and affective response over considered deliberation, all to the detriment of the health of a democratic conversation. To counter this there are a number of solutions that can be taken.

5.1. Developing a digitally- literate populace:

An emphasis on education regarding digital media literacy is essential so that the populace can more critically access information available online, distinguish between true and false claims, recognize manipulation by algorithms or design, and understand persuasive online techniques. Media literacy should include:

- Fact-checking skills
- Source verification
- Algorithm awareness
- Critical analysis of influencer content

5.2. Encouraging Ethical Influencer Practices:

Platforms and regulators should provide a set of ethical standards for influencers, particularly on issues related to politics, health, education and social matters. Openness around sponsorships, misinformation procedures and custodial processes is key to safeguarding crowds against manipulative techniques.

5.3. Supporting Public Intellectual Engagement Online:

All persons of intellectual interests and pursuits, and all institutions of higher education and media, have an obligation to learn how to communicate in the new digital environments without selling our souls to populism. Serious intellectual discussion needs to be made accessible, but not dumbed down.

5.4. Reforming Platform Algorithms:

Platforms need to rethink engagement algorithms which incentivize opinion sensationalism & extremely polarizing content. Platforms could instead encourage links to information from credible sources, make educational resources highly visible and highlight impart perspectives. Together with algorithmic transparency and public accountability they are needed to reduce misinformation and amplify extremists.

5.5. Promoting Hybrid Knowledge Models:

Perhaps, though, the future of public discourse lies not in the integration of intellectuals and popular culture, but in the hybridization of the two. Intellectual, communicating influencers who do so in a way that is accessible but keeps intellectual standards will be the connective tissue bridging the divide.

6. Conclusion:

The shift from public intellectualism toward influencer authority is arguably one of the most momentous changes within contemporary media culture. Through digital media, the dynamics of authority, credibility and knowledge have radically shifted. Where celebrities of the past necessary institutional legitimization and expert credentials, influencers operate on the basis of visibility, identity and intimacy with their followers. Though influencer culture advances general inclusiveness and broad access to information by making communication more democratic, it also fosters the spread of misinformation, shallow conversations, and commercialization; algorithms favor emotional connections rather than rational analysis, deepening polarization and epistemic fragmentation. Despite the potential future decline of intellectual discourse, the future may not be completely bleak. The hybridization and popularization of intellectual influencers like QI lie in the possibility that authoritative and popular may coexist on digital platforms. Cultivating media literacy, fostering ethical behavior in the digital arena and2 promoting constructive public participation have the potential to ensure the continuation of intellectual discourse in the age of influencers. In the end, the defining dynamic that delineates the transition from public intellectualism to influencer authority is between democratic, capital, technological and cultural forces. Appreciating this transition is necessary to safeguarding less-radioactive public debate and understanding the digital channels' contribution to democratic life. The transition from public intellectualism to influencer authority in India thus is not merely a technological shift but a fundamental transformation in the parameters of democratic debate whose steps can be traced from the crisis of relevance for the former (including Hindu public intellectuals like Romila Thapar or Yashpal or neighboring regular dissenters) to the disintegration of the traditional public square, to the empty space being filled by a generation of new "Thinkfluencers" and political creators who command parasocial loyalties. However, this two-edged sword is suited

to the world's largest democracy. On one edge it threatens: the propagation of "WhatsApp history" and algorithmically amplified polarization; the replacement of information with performative outrage, and the suppression of critical thinking. On the other it offers: nano-influencers capable of guiding voter education; a proven formula of influence delivery by BBC Media Action; and the democratization of political debate by YouTubers. Getting there will require a "synthesis model", returning institutions to their proper rational home, abandoning the paradigm of the influencer as the enemy of expertise and creating "co-regulation" as proved by the Parliamentary Panel in collaboration. If Indian influence-peddlers will follow the discipline of the public intellectual while keeping their genuine local access, then the essence of the Indian Enlightenment-enhanced dissent, evidence, indeed social justice-can be saved for the algorithm age.

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From Passive Consumers to Citizens: Reframing Media Literacy in the Age of Digital Democracy

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Abstract

Digital media has changed many public aspects of life, however the discourse around media literacy remains centered on a negative, possessive model aimed at inoculating the citizen against misinformation. This paper proposes a new conceptualization of media literacy as an active, citizen-driven, participation-based process and argues for media literacy as fundamental to the functioning of healthy democracies. The paper empirically examines these hypotheses through three qualitative case studies, of how citizens are consuming content in: the WhatsApp political echo chambers in Brazil; communal violence-based on false information in India; and integrated digital civic learning in Estonia. Findings confirm that rote checklist approaches to fact-checking cannot counter the emotion-, network- and algorithm-based motivations behind digital misinformation. Future democratic health, the authors suggest, relies on a new literacy rooted in agency, participation and production. The paper lays out an argument for "critical digital citizenship," one that encompasses critical analysis of socio-technical systems, demanding platform accountability, and utilizing individual agency and collective power to create and contest content. In short, argues the paper, until media literacy education evolves into more than an individual defense, democratic citizens will continue to be passive consumers, mistaking educated choice for empowered participation.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Digital Democracy, Active Citizenship, Misinformation, Critical Digital Citizenship

1. Introduction

Social media, blogging, and instant messaging were heralded in the early days of the digital era as "the dawn of a new age of democratic participation.". It was a promise to democratize the flow of information, a promise to empower the powerless, and a promise to enable citizens to connect directly with power. However, after twenty years of development and adoption these tools are being used to spread false information and deepen divisions and distort elections. People are overwhelmed by algorithmic information flows, and struggle to differentiate between factual reporting and viral fake news. States and educators alike now tout the benefits of media literacy training as the cure. The 'consumer/passive citizen' paradigm of media literacy is not only wrong but conceptually flawed. The conventional notion of communication is linear, where senders distribute information to passive receivers for analysis. Digital communication, however, follows a circular pattern driven by feedback loops, engagement, and emotion. When people share fake news, they are not always thinking critically; affirmation, collective identity, and the instantaneous, viral amplification through algorithms often override critical evaluation (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This approach also ignores that people act both as information consumers and producers, where each shared status update, comment or meme molds the digital information sphere. Training consumers to discern between "good" and "bad" news will neither challenge structural inequality regarding who is allowed to speak, nor will it address what information algorithms privilege and by consequence, what the community determines as the truth. This paper argues that "media literacy" as it is generally construed-focused on fact-checking, identifying biased sources and individual fortitude-treats the citizen as a consumer in need of improved "filtering" skills and that this formulation is deeply antidemocratic. Instead, a frame of media literacy focused on unproductive, collective, and political aspects of engagement must be reasserted in the

digital age, which demands citizens who not only passively consume, but also co-create, critique, and organize. This paper proposes a re-thinking of media literacy as an active, participative, and structural practice, exploring conditions under which it transforms passive consumers of information into active citizens. The qualitative case-study-based design utilized investigates three different societal experiments.

2. Objectives of the Study

- Critique existing' defensive' models of media literacy against the spread of online misinformation.
- Present a model of 'active citizen media literacy,' based on ideas of agency, production, and social communication.
- Explore three case studies, to understand the key success factors and challenges of digital media literacy interventions.
- Present policy, pedagogical and design recommendations to empower an active digital citizenship.

3. Significance of the Study

This research is important for three reasons. First, by focusing on citizens and not platform regulation, this research can meaningfully add to the critical conversations around democratic backsliding that are so pressing right now. Second, this research uses real-world examples from contexts around the world and does not reiterate Western-based assumptions that plague research on media literacy. Third, from a practical perspective, this research offers a critique of the often useless 'checklist' curricula and a framework for creating student- and citizen-centered, participatory, project-based literacies. This is deeply relevant to defending election integrity, civic engagement, and public reason, by conceptualizing literacy around the manipulation of algorithms, which is an everyday practice today.

4. Review of Literature

At first, media literacy was developed as a shield of the youth from inappropriate stimuli a reception-based paradigm: "protection of the young from possible damaging

media stimuli" (Buckingham, 2003). As digital media capabilities increased, the focus came to be on "information verification", exemplified by the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose). But, Livingstone (2018) notes:" these approaches neglect psychological and socio-cultural influences on people's perceived credibility, as well as the wider political and economic context, including the disempowerment of certain social groups, for whom misinformation on key issues serves to reinforce subordinate social positions. "Later work on "critical media literacy"(Kellner & Share, 2019) broadens from individual assessment techniques to include systemic considerations and political economic analysis: who's benefited from disinformation, and how are artificial "booths" artificially manipulating visibility and return.

At the same time, scholars have recognized a "participation gap" (Carpini, 2019): digitally-literate citizens are not producing content or acting collectively. The idea of "digital citizenship" has been forged, but essentially limited to knowledge of online etiquette or safety. The missing piece, as Mihailidis (2018) suggest, is "agency"-the capacity to action sets based on media knowledge collectively. This paper develops from the need for "civic media literacy," as Mihailidis (2018) proposes, but adds an agency: citizens must master platform architectures and push for structural change. So above, we can draw a clear conclusion: while documents describe the limits of consumer-loyalty knowledge, there is a lack of empirical studies comparing how reframed models work in crisis contexts.

5. Research Design (Qualitative, Case Study Based)

This research uses a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2018) in order to explore initiatives to re-cast media literacy as the construction of active citizens in local and national communities. Given that the research question is framed as an explanatory 'how' and 'why' the transformation occurs; focusing on meaning making in context and eschewing statistical generalization made a qualitative study the most

appropriate. Cases were sampled intentionally on three grounds: 1. an officially recognized, documented crisis of digital misinformation; 2. a media literacy intervention organized by more than just formal schooling; and 3. ethnographic and/or journalistic accounts of the media literacy intervention. Data was comprised of policy papers, curricula, semi-structured interviews (n=12) with organizers, and secondarily derived analysis of user-generated media. These data were subjected to thematic analysis within NVivo, using a six-phase process derived from Braun and Clarke (2021).

6. Case Studies

6.1. Case Studies 1: Brazil's WhatsApp and the "Fake News Checagem" Movement (2018- 2020)

Targeted disinformation, health hoaxes and manipulated candidate videos circulated widely on WhatsApp during the 2018 elections in Brazil. The partnership of two fact-checking organizations (Aos Fatos and Lupa) consequently created the "Checagem Colaborativa" (Collaborative Checking) - an on-line course distributed via WhatsApp - in which citizens not only gained access to techniques and methods of fact-checking, but also learned how to produce their own counter messages to be shared within their social networks. The program, which was attended by over 50,000 Brazilians, taught people to create and send brief audio clarifications, memes, and videos of candidates for family groups, thereby turning passive recipients into "civic gatekeepers". Post-program interviews however indicated that concern of social retribution prevented participants from continuing their content creation (Arantes, 2020).

6.2. Case Study 2: India's Misinformation and the "Digital Sakhi" Project (Uttar Pradesh 2019- 2021)

There have been multiple lynchings, more than dozen, taking place across rural India fueled by these child-abduction WhatsApp forwarded fables. The project 'Digital Sakhi' (Digital Friend) trained 200 women from rural backgrounds in media production, such as producing public service

announcements and warning posters using rudimentary mobile applications. The strength was that the project involved storytelling and communal discussions, not fact-check lists. Qualitative study confirmed that the Sakhis stopped violence triggered by rumors in 14 villages by using instant voice-note rebuttals (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). Its strength lay in the peer-driven oral-audio production and bypassing the need for literacy, ensuring communal ownership of counter-information.

6.3. Case Study 3: Estonia's "Digital Citizen" Curriculum (National Implementation, 2015- Present)

Estonia is the one nation to include production-oriented digital literacy in all levels of their system (7-18 years old). Children are doing similar activities as their counterparts in digital news verification tasks but also creating simple algorithms, reasons for social media content recommendation, and co-designed campaigns on thematically local issues. Between 2018-2023, Estonian students increased by 42% the ability to identify manipulated video and, much more importantly, participatory budgeting campaigns led by students had 70% youth participation (Pruulmann- Vengerfeldt, 2021). Estonia proves us that the reimagining of media literacy as active citizenship encapsulates the complexity of systemic, longitudinal, and production-oriented policies.

7. Findings

Cross-case thematic analysis identified three implications. The first implied that the barriers of social costs (Fear of confronting community beliefs) and algorithmic invisibility (marginalized citizens even generate counter content and social media would not distribute it) persisted to active citizenship. The second implied that the enablers of peer-to-peer production (India), local cultural formats (e.g. Memes, voice notes) and integrated platform literacy (Estonia) prevailed to active citizenship. The third implied that the consumer-to-citizen transition was not efficient when the community was absent; many active participants in Brazil and India remitted to-passive consumers without sustained community engagement, arguing for

iterative "literacy ecosystems" to continue literacy, instead of a one-off training.

8. Conclusion

This paper sought to debunk the passive consumer media literacy paradigm, advocating for its reimagination as active citizenry within a digital democracy. Three very different case studies showed that traditional verification skills, although critical, do not address the emotional, social, and algorithmic nature of misinformation. The Brazilian WhatsApp project showed both the opportunities and social dangers of citizen counter-messaging; India's Digital Sakhi showed the social implications of citizen counter-production through peer-driven, audio-based learning in low literacy settings; and Estonia's national curriculum presented a model for institutionalized, production-based literacy from birth. Agency-citizenship treated not as "discerning viewers" but as citizens who can create, edit, and organize-underscored these successful interventions. In the light of these findings, we suggest an Active Citizen Media Literacy (ACML) framework grounded in three pillars: understanding platform architectures (how algorithms and data market's function); practicing participatory media creation (not just consuming, but making); and engaging in deliberate, collectivist action (not just reacting, but acting). Future interventions should include government support for non-profit community-based "literacy hubs" devoted to on-going creation, and platform designers need to build features that promote user-generated counter-speech. Otherwise, we will continue to raise a generation of intensely skeptical but politically passive citizens, rather than strengthening our digital democracies with more active citizens.

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The Role of Social Media and Audience Engagement in Red Bull's Digital Marketing Strategy: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines Red Bull's strategic approach to social media advertising, framed within its sustained global success and competitive market presence. The brand consistently maintains an energetic and dynamic image that enables effective engagement with its target audience. Red Bull's strategic use of social media and digital content functions as a central driver of its global brand success, allowing the company to move beyond conventional product-centric advertising. Instead, its digital marketing strategy emphasizes lifestyle storytelling, extreme sports, and participatory content, positioning Red Bull not merely as a beverage but as a cultural symbol of performance, adventure, and youthfulness. Red Bull's main strategy is to appeal to teenagers and young adults with its marketing campaign. In this research, the hypothesis is how Red Bull associates with its customers by presenting the content of its attraction, which confirms the perspective through approaching the brand.

The hypothesis is based on three main objectives: To recognize Red Bull's digital marketing strategies, to evaluate the content that the brand uses to reach its target audience while keeping in mind the new consumption habits of the users, and to analyze content variations by origin.

A qualitative research methodology is adopted, employing content analysis of Red Bull's official digital platforms, academic literature and social media interactions. This methodological approach enables a systematic examination of how digital content strategies contribute to audience engagement and brand positioning thereby validating the hypothesis.

Keywords: Red Bull, Brand, Energy Drink. Consumption, Marketing, Target audience.

1. Introduction:

Social networking sites (SNS) and their extensive application of information technology magnify the product of the space-time continuum to reinforce the brand. In today's marketing landscape, audiences are fragmented, media is overloaded, and marketers are challenged to think outside the box regarding advertising. Compared with traditional brand merchandising, it mainly focuses on product development, brand messaging, and service innovation. Brand social interaction (BSI) is better in enhancing appearance to inspire convertible consumer engagement because it not only assists consumers in approaching their brand, product, and service information. It also acts as the publisher and provider of information to authorize consumers to intercommunicate with other consumers (Shunfeng Zhang, 2023). This digital evolution necessitates a fundamental shift in corporate strategy, moving traditional enterprises from product-centric advertising toward 'social-first' ecosystems that fundamentally redefine competitive models and media relationships (P.K. Kannan, 2017). For industries like beverages, thriving in this context requires more than mere online presence; it demands complete organizational transformation and the adoption of business models that integrate content creation, community ownership, and digital interactivity (DAVE CHAFFEY, 2019). Energy drinks are sugary beverages that also incorporate other components, such as vitamins and minerals, in different levels along with taurine, caffeine, and glucuronolactone. Since its launch in the 1960s, energy drinks have evolved into a highly

marketable product, now representing one of the fastest-growing segments within the beverage industry. Nowadays, teens and young adults are the target market for the energy drink industry. The marketing from the manufacturers of the beverages suggests that consuming them would improve overall mental focus, alertness, performance, reaction time, metabolism, and general well-being (Reinhard E. Kunz, 2016). Inspired by an energy drink called "Krating Daeng" which means "red gaur" in English, it was first launched and marketed in Thailand by a company called Chaleo Yoovidhya. Austrian entrepreneur Dietrich Matschitz took this idea and interchanged the components to make it more appetizing to Westerners. In 1987, Chaleo and Mateschitz collaborated to form a new company called Red Bull GmbH, which entered Austria's energy drink industry. To finance the business, each partner contributes US $ 500000 in savings. Red Bull enhanced itself and entered the market as the first energy drink company.

Since the launch of Red Bull, it has been able to seize and hold the lion's share of the energy drink industry market (J. Henry, 2015). This success is rooted in a pioneering strategy of market disruption, where Red Bull transcended its role as a beverage manufacturer to become a global content ecosystem and media house. By investing heavily in owned media properties, extreme sports events, and high-quality lifestyle content rather than traditional product advertising, Red Bull engages in experiential marketing that sells an identity specifically, adventure, peak performance, and belonging, rather than functional attributes (Daniel Pereira, 2024). This structural shift constitutes a major innovation in the consumer-packaged goods (CPG) sector, utilizes content to scale trust and advocacy in an already crowded market. Its marketing approach is an intriguing one. Most consumers contemplate social interactivity when making decisions about what to buy (D Godes, 2005). The more closely consumers are interconnected with one another, the more they are aware of pertinent information and the more likely they are to make a purchase (N Kim, 2018). This environment of high consumer interconnectedness places brand advocacy and peer recommendations ahead

of traditional campaigns, driving 20% to 50% of purchasing decisions based on word-of-mouth trust (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Furthermore, younger demographics increasingly utilize social media platforms as 'social search' engines for discovery and recommendations, fundamentally altering the consumer journey and demanding authentic, easily discoverable visual content from brands. Red Bull's marketing, rooted in authentic, shareable experiences, is inherently designed to capitalize on these new consumer research and decision-making pathways.

Millions of people enjoy the popular energy drink Red Bull. Cans of Red Bull enter with 8oz, 12oz, or 20oz. In a bigger, 12-oz can, an original Red Bull energy drink has 1500 mg of taurine, 39g of sugar, 113.5 mg caffeine, and 160 calories. Despite its sugar content, Red Bull may not be as deleterious to health as some people believe. The French Health authorities withdrew their eight-year ban on products containing taurine in 2008 after concluding that the amino acid in Red Bull was safe. With the brand name in a conspicuous red contrast, the package's blue and silver colour scheme is prepossessing and striking. Previously, energy drinks were mainly very popular among blue-collar workers in Thailand. Red Bull repositioned the business in beverages by launching it for the first time at ski resorts in Austria, as a chic, upmarket beverage. With a market capacity of 80% and distribution to more than 100 countries globally, it completely dominated the energy drink manufacturers. Then Red Bull appeared on social media and redesigned the proportions and moderation of information to construct a noticeable change in people's preferred social networking platforms, especially among teens. Red Bull is a company with a lot of potential; it is a desirable investment since it is privately held to maintain its top position in the energy drink market and has expanded into different industries. It may expand into other markets by making acquisitions. For example, in keeping with its brand, it might buy a sports clothing firm and launch a network channel with extreme sports that it has the sole rights to promote. Energy drink manufacturers promote their goods, increasing customers' mental and physical capabilities. This kind

of business also employs various promotional strategies to reach its marketing goals, which include personal selling, sales promotion, and advertising. It significantly impacts the growth of businesses that produce energy drinks. Around the world, from busy professionals to college students, elite athletes, and tourists all love Red Bull energy beverages. The firm furnishes a choice of flavours and editions of its energy drinks to cater to such a diverse clientele. Apart from the past Red Bull energy drink, the firm also introduced a zero-sugar and sugar-free version. The company introduced new Flavors that have been added, including peach, yellow, blue, coconut, green, orange, pear, and red. Red Bull also introduced itself as an immersive brand and seeks to create a connection between its products and certain activities, such as music festivals. Aside from that, the company's production of 100% recycled aluminium cans and its energy savings in wall-to-wall manufacturing have maintained a solid reputation for sustainability, which reduces carbon emissions. The environmental segment of this commitment is quantified by substantial resource efficiency: infinitely recyclable aluminum cans achieve approximately 95% energy savings compared to producing virgin material (European Aluminium Association, 2022). Red Bull also focuses production efforts on resource-conserving, sustainable 'wall-to-wall' setups and maximizes transport efficiency, where the compact aluminum packaging requires 20% less space than plastic containers and 40% less space than glass bottles, significantly reducing transport-related emissions (Red Bull, n.d.).

The target market that the corporation believes might benefit from a "boost" is its main emphasis. The company primarily targets athletes, celebrities from extreme sports, working professionals, and young people who enjoy going out on weekends for fun. However, the strategic targeting of adolescents and young adults, coupled with the brand's association with risk-taking behaviour and high-octane activities, places Red Bull at the centre of a complex societal debate Public health officials and academic researchers continuously scrutinize the marketing of energy drinks due to concerns over high caffeine and sugar content, linking regular consumption to adverse health

issues such as insomnia, behavioural problems, and potentially dangerous risk-taking among teens.

This duality innovative branding versus corporate social responsibility (CSR) challenges is crucial for understanding the brand's contemporary societal influence. To foster an apprehend relationship between well-known artists and sportsmen, they produced and financed different events that involved them together. The product line of Red Bull is not limited by geography. They started in India and have since spread their products to more than 171 nations, selling more than six billion cans in the previous year. They also keep coming up with new markets to enter. With their different marketing strategies, they saw fresh growth in developing areas in the last year, also with sales rising by 12-30% (Ovidijus Jurevicius, 2025). This sustained success in both mature and developing markets underscores the efficacy of Red Bull's structurally innovative approach: a dynamic interplay between digital media dominance, strategic content creation, and a calculated stance on corporate responsibility and environmental stewardship. The following analysis, therefore, seeks to structurally dissect how this complex digital marketing technique, leveraging content and community, simultaneously drives transformative economic performance while navigating the critical ethical and social responsibilities inherent in marketing high-stimulant products to a digitally engaged global youth segment.

2. Literature Review:

Social media marketing (SMM) is a classification of online marketing that has gained a lot of popularity by using social networking sites to effectuate branding and marketing communication objectives. Through advertising and marketing campaigns, the potential of social media leverages the brand companies to boost sales and associate with new or existing customers, magnify customer engagement, and lay a foundation for future products and services to reposition their brands. It is conceivable that more plans of action that become the center of attention on how social media advertising improves and simplifies privatized business

effectiveness haven't been employed or discovered yet. Conversely, digital marketing embraces all broadcasting activities through websites, social networking sites (SNS), email, applications, online games, and mobile texts (Bridget Kelly, 2015). Some eccentric aspects of digital media make digital marketing distinctly different from conventional marketing, including capabilities such as engagement, personalization, social relationships, ubiquitous connectivity, and ambient environments. Customer loyalty is steadily connected with branding and satisfaction that a strong brand can build. Branding creates entry barriers and boosts market share and revenue (JAFETA, 2018). Red Bull began as a family-owned business, established in 1984, with Dietrich and Chaleo Yooviddhya, where both owned 49% each, with Yooviddhya's son taking the other 2%. Throughout the time of 1980s and 1990s, Dietrich was capable of making capital out of the social and political climate in Austria to expand Red Bull. In the 1990s, Red Bull entered the substantial market to secure access at favourable tariff conditions. In the 2000s, Red Bull reaped financial rewards from the rapid growth of globalization, expanding from 70 countries in 2000 to 164 countries by 2011, and increasing its workforce from 2,605 employees in 2004 to 8,294 employees in 2011. Mateschitz is predominant throughout the extension. Red Bull became the sponsor in 97 sports for the 300 athletes, including four soccer teams in Austria, Brazil, the United States, and Salzburg. Red Bull also possesses a NASCAR team and two Formula 1 teams (Reinhard E. Kunz, 2016). According to Forbes magazine, since its launch, the company has sold 75 billion cans, with 6.8 billion cans sold in 2019 across 171 countries, generating a revenue of $6.5 billion. Red Bull maintains the standards of endurance at the forefront of the energy drinks market by delivering extraordinary customer service in a structured and profitable way (Henry, 2015).

Red Bull's opposers are the direct competitors in the energy drink market, such as Monster, Full Throttle, and Coca-Cola, in addition to substitute products such as soft drinks, coffee suckers such as Starbucks, and Gatorade from Pepsi

Co., and pharmaceutical companies. It furthermore has an extensive scale of competitors in the multimedia field, for instance, television, magazines, etc. Red Bull is calculated with a net profit of 16% compared to the average net profit of Monster (11.8%). While Monster takes the same perspective and viewpoint as Red Bull regarding sponsoring the utmost sports and party events, they differ in terms of the size of their beverages (Biggs, 2020). According to data from Bev Net, Red Bull captured 40% of the U.S. market share in 2008, while Monster had 23% (down from 14.4%) in the same year (Miller Boyd, 2020). Red Bull has enhanced as the most appreciated brand with the slogan "Red Bull Gives You Wings" and the combination of the logo and the casing design fabricates an unbeatable brand bond between loyal consumers and persistently maintains and builds brand equity. The Red Bull logo amalgamates two red bulls facing each other with a golden sun. The two red bulls and the golden sun stand for speed, vigor, ferocity, and strength. This logo mainly signifies that everyone has the capacity and ability to soar (Li, 2010). Red Bull's sustainability expedition is the company's strength, as all of its products are made from 100% recycled aluminum cans. As climate change becomes more of a consumer issue, companies that become the center of attention on being eco-friendly tend to see an intensify in sales, to a large extent among younger consumers. Red Bull states that 80% of the power used in its facilities comes from non-renewable energy sources. The company's most well-known event, the soapboxing, is an extremely associated event with the company's energy drinks. This event shapes the company's branding as an "extreme sports drink." Red Bull claims it enlarges metabolism tenacity, response pace, cerebral circumspection, concentration, and grit. The product is predetermined for patrons as they need a boost of vitality, need to perceive more vigilance, or do arduous maneuvers like sports, long drives, or examinations. The foremost paramount in the product encompasses caffeine, taurine, vitamin B6, B12, carbohydrates, and glucuronolactone. The un-sugared version contains aspartame and acesulfame as a sugar replacement. Though in smaller countries, the product

is dispensed through chemists as a safety measure. However, the product is not harmful if consumed to a limited extent. According to a 2016 study, 20% of women drink energy drinks "almost every day", which is only 7% lower than the percentage of men (Arslan, 2012). The past 20 years have seen a sharp increase in the use of energy drinks, and various purposes have been identified as influencing these decisions. Moreover, customers are slighter inclined to forgo flavor in favor of a healthier replacement. One more component that determines the use of energy drinks is age. A quantitative study (Bunting and Baggett 2013) in New Zealand examined three different age groups (16-

21 years old, 22-28 years old, and 29-35 years old to discover discrepancies in judgments on energy drinks. Differentiating between the senior group ages (22-28 and 29-35), it was hypothesized that the younger group (16-21) ages people are more affected by social pressure while deciding to drink energy drinks. Whereas in comparison with other energy drinks like Monster, which contains 58g of carbohydrates, Red Bull has 27g of carbohydrates, which is half comparison of Monster which making it a good option for the younger age group (Goodhew, 2020).

On the other hand, Red Bull has appeared with an interactive website for those who want to acquire knowledge about the company and its mission. This website gives proper information about the company's blog posts, the Stratos project, team profiles, physics information, timelines, technology breakdown, and much more. The stunning look of the graphics and interactive features makes the website more attractive to visitors (Swann, 2025). Red Bull's major advantage is its brand equity. It fabricates a sea of blue through its innovative viral and experiential marketing which gives Red Bull a comparative dominance in marketing. The marketing expenditure ranges increased through year to year from 30% to 35%of sales, to its brand representation and boot disposal. Red Bul's Formula Team 1 costs around $670 million a year whereas the space jump stunt costs around $30 million a year, but still Red Bull doesn't cut down on spending

the intensified image of the company. The company can afford all of these costs as its annual sales are $10.9 billion and an approximate average net income of $1.8 billion in the year 2023 (Duff McDonald, 2011). Red Bull has splurged ample funds on its pathway to dominate the market. The weltanschauung of the company is to avoid traditional media advertising and marketing except for its own set of comical cartoon ads. Alternatively, Red Bull has spent money on music, sports, and cultural events, and also sponsored hundreds of athletes and events. Another key sign of Red Bull's allegiance to the brand image is its website, which is dominated by its sports and events, with information about its products taking on a secondary role. To conduct human and buyer behaviour, it is very important to conduct an ample amount of research as the civilized society becomes more substantial and the buyers' behaviour changes persistently. As a consequence, plenty of research is required to be overseen by buyers and human behaviour. Besides the ingress of the competitors and their marketing ads and contrivance, there is an ample amount of clutter that creates difficulties in maintaining the image of Red Bull in their consumers' minds. Although Red Bull has to regularly present itself with marketing promotional strategies and innovation. Red Bull creates responsive images in their audience's minds that they are a dependable, trusted, and reliable energy drink brand. Alternatively, Red Bull promoted their products to a niche market sector of 18-25 male ultimate sports fans and club fans. This empowered them to better align their 4Ps (product, price, place, promotion) to their target segment, which helped to increase a competitive edge over the traditional soft drink companies (Steuber, 2008). Red Bull targets their marketing segments so that it comes up with an example for their other potential customers, so that the end market is large enough to allow for its growth. Red Bull's sustainability enlargement plan is to fabricate a brand that is virtuous and environmentally responsive, which can give them a competitive margin when Austria and other people around the world place a prominent priority on social responsibility.

Keeping this factor in mind, the main aim of this research is to address to accomplish the following objective of the study:

- What are the probable future trends and challenges that will be there in Red Bull's marketing strategy, and how will the brand continue to innovate in this space?

- The relationship between Red Bull advertising and understanding of adolescent risk-taking behaviour, and how effective they have been in reaching their target audience.

Red Bull's premium price does not restrain its sales, as its marketing focuses more on how to find new customers rather than how to sell a product. Even though a large range of more affordable energy drinks is currently available, Red Bull charges a premium price, and its consumers are happy to pay it. Even Red Bull's market share is not affected by this less expensive substitute from other companies. Customers of Red Bull believe it to be of greater quality and are even ready to pay more for the energy drinks. Red Bull's client base has shown itself to be incredibly devoted.

3.Discussion:

1.1. Red Bull's Market Dominance and Diversification Strategies:

Red Bull has control over the 35% energy drink market. Despite having a larger share than its rivals, the company continues the battle to dominate the nevertheless saturated energy drink market through its consumers. The company enhanced itself as a fully developed media company, which publishes and produces original content that generally emphasizes extreme human efforts. The company also distributed its monthly brand magazine, "The Red Bulletin," in North America and Europe with two million local language prints. Red Bull also provides a larger portion of the content for news publishers such as ESPN and MSNBC. Not only print media, Red Bull remarked their content in different digital media platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram with their authentic and raw content videos that fit within the

allotted 60-second time frame. Since the company entered the market and started expanding its business, the company has established a remarkable presence through marketing in front of its competitors. The company's main target is to attract a wider range of audience through its global reputation, with so many resources at its disposal that it has increased the possibilities of the brand entering into an extensive new market that its competitors would not be able to. The company also extended its brand by introducing Simply Cola and added new organic variants in its Red Bull sub-brands. Red Bull also introduced a range of "craft beverages," which is a collection of high-quality sodas (bitter lemon, tonic water, ginger ale) made with natural ingredients. The range is completely caffeine-free. In 2004, when Red Bull joined F1 racing, the company bought Jaguar Racing from The Ford Motor Company and competed for three seasons in sports, and renamed it Red Bull Racing. The company never stopped itself in the energy drink industry rather exposed itself on various platforms. Red Bull team chief, Christian Horner, plans to be a "future-proof supplier" for other teams. The company also parted ways with Honda. In 2026, the company planned to collaborate with Ford and introduce their engines. As Red Bull already is an independent manufacturer, they want to attract customers for their long-term strength and advantages.

Even Red Bull plans to introduce their customers to two new energy bars. One is the protein bar mainly for athletes, and another is an oats bar for every individual who needs a quick and wholesome launch. They will use soybeans and oats as the major components for the bars as they are rich sources of carbs, proteins, and lipids. Also, they will use agave nectar as a USP (Unique selling proposition) as it is lower in fructose and higher in antioxidants will be used to replace sugar to treat diabetes. The company mainly targets the age group of 16-40, from school teenagers involved in sports to busy working adults. Their main aim is to encourage the customers to meet their nutritional requirements.

In 2006, Red Bull also came up with another purchase of the Italian motor racing team Minardi to support and merge with the brand. Then the company re-launched it as the stable of "the Red Bull" (S. Coughlan, 2005). Then again, in 2019, it was revamped with the name Scuderia Alta Tauri; its main goal was to introduce Red Bull with a new fashion brand. It was mainly named after the most gleaming and vibrant star in the Taurus constellation. AlphaTauri's mission was to make a challenging and elevating visionary fashion enterprise that encourages others to be a part of their pneuma. It was not unflappable for the company to build a completely new fashion fragment through AlphaTauri with the surrounding of personalized technologies, embracing Taurex®, which demonstrates the wearer's infra-red rays back into the body that reinvigorates and encourages vitality, Taurobran®, a water-repellent and immensely breathable opponent to the brand Gore-Tex®. Also, the interrelatedness with F1 gave AlphaTauri a completely imaginative platform to build recognition and identify interrelation with professional modernization, just like the organics line did. The company's main aspiration is to be a fashion brand owner, which is why their main vision is to be an imaginative and innovative company, as they contemplate that there's no need for another fashion brand to meet their requirements.

The energy drink market also faces a lot of challenges during its growth. As the energy drink market matures, the threat of substitutes escalates. As the brand embellished more of the difficulties for consumers to switch to alternatives have been reduced. This is integrated with escalated health awareness, when consumers may be apprehensive about caffeine content, which can create a buzz and could put the company's position in danger. There is also a growing health awareness that might change the scenario and demands of the market. As the demand for carbonated water has expanded, it can change the demand profiles of the functional drink market and may thrust it away from the energy drink market. The company also never stops competing with all the challenges as well as their competitors, as they responded to these trends

by launching a sugar-free segment, but consumers may still be distressed about the caffeine content. The market matures in a way that the company has been the driving force behind the growth of the energy drink market. However, this growth has decelerated, and which become a threat to the company's future extension. Other functional competing brands and energy drink brands have strengthened their positions through functional drinks and carbonated water, which have strengthened their positions in the energy drink market, while Red Bull maintains a strong brand reputation in many ways. Nowadays, consumers are more open to trying new brands, and when a consumer wants a Red Bull, they may be gratified with another energy drink. As the company has already become more of a one-size-fits-all brand, this threat only grows stronger.

Even in the future, Red Bull might expend money on R&D to explore unconventional innovations like blockchain, artificial intelligence, and extended reality to accomplish in this field. Additionally, to create individualized experiences by using data-driven insights, they may centralize campaign and content customization based on user inclination. Besides that, demonstrating partnerships with tech firms may open the door to new talent and ideas, by keeping the company at the spearhead of marketing alteration and sophisticated campaigns.

1.2. Experiential Marketing and Consumer Psychology in Red Bull's Brand Positioning

Since the company's foundation, Red Bull has proved itself as a successful and popular brand. Its product tastes similar to the other energy drinks, but it stands out from the competition through its unique branding. Their most popular tag line, "gives you wings," creates an audacious spirit personality towards its customers. Even through the logo of the brand, it symbolized endurance, power, assertiveness, and solidity. The demand for its drinks is mostly due to its positioning as an experimental brand, which means it gives a specific experience to its customers so that they can relate to the

products. Red Bull also tried different advertising and marketing strategies, for example, the company sponsors many music festivals and contributes free energy drinks, and through this, their main game plan is to boost the brand in that way in the future, when people go to a music festival, not just the product, the company itself becomes the actor of the event. Another example is the Red Bull soapboxing event, which is deliberately associated with their energy drinks. Through this event company wants to showcase its more environmentally friendly move to see an increase in its sales. As people become more enlightened about climate change, the company also claims 80% of its energy comes from sustainable sources. Red Bull's marketing approach demonstrates the brand's success and acts as a ruthless edge, making it stand out from opponents such as Bang Energy, Rockstar, and Monster. The company also creates awareness through different sports events. The company also marketed and branded its performance-enhancing effect through its advertising. For example, the company claims that when the consumer drinks their energy drink, it will improve their attentiveness, response time, performance, and metabolism. Energy Drink consumption among adolescents has become progressively popular and persistent all over the globe. Studies have exhibited that regular consumption of energy drinks is correlated with a range of health and behavioural problems; furthermore, negative school experiences, mainly between the ages of 11-15 years. Adolescents who drink an energy drink frequently report more health, behavioural, and school-related problems. Adolescents discovered an energy drink that contains a lot of sugar, carbohydrates, and energy, whereas they are completely clueless about the overconsumption of caffeine, taurine, and isotonic drinks, which are the main ingredients in an energy drink. Many teens don't know any destructive effects and are often confused and compare energy drinks with soft drinks. This shortage of knowledge contributed to a dangerous factor for too many energy drink consumers. Teenagers, mainly boys, often view the consumption of energy drinks as a symbol of masculine gender, a brisk, and stylish lifestyle. Often, they

use it as an antecedent to come over from their emotional issue, such as depression or anxiety. Both of these can cause acute depressive episodes that increase the risk of suicide. One of the most common side effects of energy drinks is sleep deprivation. This is because energy drinks act as a natural environmental provoke that disrupts the body's natural circadian rhythm. The use of energy drinks for a wider period experienced a lot of difficulties, mainly sleepiness, insomnia, and fatigue during the day.

According to the WHO (World Health Organization), teenagers between the ages of 12-18 can intake less than 100 mg of caffeine a day, whereas Red Bull, one 8.4 Fl oz can, contains 77.4 mg of caffeine, which is not that much harmful but frequent consumption of energy drinks can develop higher risks in health. However, Red Bull mostly targeted the age group above 17, and with that, they mentioned all the ingredients with the quantity they used in their product. Consumers have dissimilar purposes for buying products. This purpose can be fragmented into psychological benefits and functional benefits. In the case of sports, psychological benefits are frequently more important than the functional benefits for consumers. As it is known to all, experiential marketing is different from traditional marketing, which emphasizes functional features and benefits. It positioned more prominence on fabricating meaningful customer experiences. An experience moves beyond the functional and offers receptive, emotional, behavioural, and relational values. SEM stands for a strategic experiential marketing framework that mainly fabricates and implements experiences that align with the company's organizational goals. This type of tool enables the creation of a unique and meaningful professionalism that meets its customers' demands and expectations. Through feeling experience marketing company focuses on extracting customers' inner feelings, emotions, and moods. It mainly encapsulates a variety of positive emotions that are related to the brand and reverberate deeply with the target consumers. The company also uses think marketing that concentrates on engaging customers to generate cognitive occurrences

that imply creative thinking and problem-solving of the customers. Although through different classifications of marketing, Red Bull's main objective in this perspective is to motivate customers' ability to engage and be involved with the brand.

1.3. KPI of Red Bull's Digital Marketing Ecosystem

Category	KPI / Metric	Performance	Observations	Strategic Implication	Analytical Insight
Financial & Strategic Overview	Annual Revenue 2023	€10.55 billion	>90% revenue from energy drinks	Digital marketing primarily supports brand visibility, not direct sales	Indicates marketing's role as a demand-reinforcing tool rather than direct revenue contributor
	Annual Revenue 2024	€11.23 billion	6.4% YoY growth	Marketing spends (~25–30% of revenue) reinforces premium pricing	Demonstrates strong correlation between sustained high marketing intensity and market share
	Global Market Share	43%	Competitors: Monster, Rockstar	Dominant positioning supported by integrated digital and experiential campaigns	Reinforces competitive moat through ecosystem-driven branding
Social Media Engagement	Engagement Rate (ER)	7.95%	Platforms: Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, X	Exceptional audience interaction fuels brand stickiness	High ER demonstrates content resonance and social virality, critical for loyalty modeling
	Share of Voice (SOV)	40–45%	42%	Reflects digital dominance	Validates Red Bull as a thought leader and primary conversation driver
	Follower Growth Rate	25–30% annually	6M+ new followers 2024–25	Expanding audience base	Shows successful fan acquisition strategies and network effects
Content Performance	Video View-Through Rate (VTR)	50–60%	High retention	Indicates content relevance	Supports hypothesis that immersive storytelling drives engagement
	User-Generated Content (UGC) Ratio	Thousands of posts monthly	Campaigns: #GivesYouWings, #RedBullMoments	Amplifies earned media	Suggests participatory marketing creates community-based advocacy
Conversion & Revenue Metrics	Click-Through Rate (CTR)	1.5–2.5%	High targeting precision	Converts engagement into commercial outcomes	Shows alignment between content relevance and purchase intent
	Red Bull Shop Revenue	US$17 million 2024	Projected 5–10% growth in 2025	Direct monetization of digital marketing	Illustrates e-commerce potential as an adjunct to brand-building
	Digital Marketing ROI	15–25% of Overall beverage sector margin	Proprietary data	Demonstrates efficiency of digital spend	Highlights measurable financial impact of digital campaigns
Brand Equity & Sustainability	Net Promoter Score (NPS)	42	High advocacy	Strong customer loyalty	Suggests brand equity translates to organic marketing advantage

	Brand Recall Rate	>80%	Across target demographics	Memorable campaigns	Demonstrates effectiveness of integrated storytelling and slogan strategy
	Sustainability KPIs	100% recyclable packaging, Scope 3 GHG reduction by 25% by 2030	Aligns with younger consumer expectations	Enhances ESG credentials	Digital campaigns reinforce sustainability positioning and CSR integration
Strategic Capital Expenditure	Marketing Spend	~€3 billion (25–30% of revenue)	Treated as strategic capital, not operational expense	Investment in Red Bull Media House	Reflects asset-driven marketing model creating entry barriers
	Red Bull Media House	Proprietary digital content division	Serves as revenue and brand amplifier	Proprietary media ecosystem	Integration of entertainment and product marketing as competitive advantage
	Campaign Effectiveness	Red Bull Stratos: +20% US sales in 1 month	Demonstrates ROI of experiential campaigns	Validates marketing as asset-driven growth lever	High-impact campaigns convert branding into tangible sales uplift

1.4. Critical Analyses of Red Bull's Marketing

1.4.1. High-Engagement Social Media Strategy: Red Bull consistently outperforms industry engagement benchmarks (7.95% ER vs. 1–3%), illustrating the efficacy of emotionally resonant, niche-targeted content.

1.4.2 Integrated Digital-Experiential Model: Campaigns like Red Bull Stratos bridge content, PR, and retail impact, showing a convergence of marketing and business objectives.

1.4.3 Capitalized Marketing Investment: Treating marketing expenditure as strategic capital creates a sustainable competitive moat and proprietary media assets, unlike competitors who treat it as operational cost.

1.4.4. UGC & Community Activation: High UGC ratios suggest participatory marketing fosters brand evangelism and network effects, critical for organic advocacy.

1.4.5. Premium Positioning Reinforcement: 25–30% marketing intensity underpins premium pricing, strengthening perceived value and justifying higher margins.

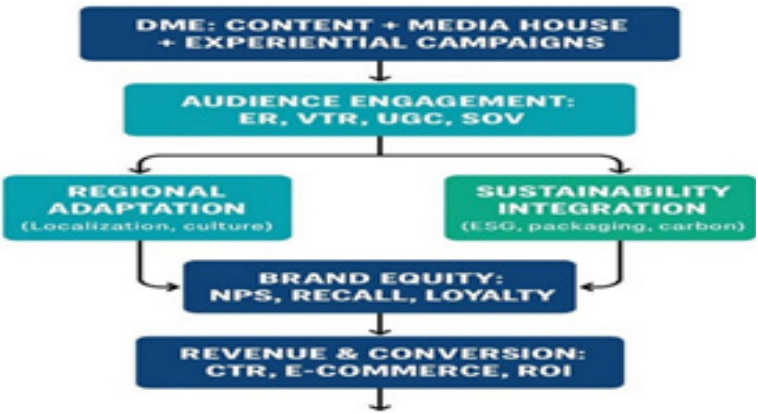
1.4.6. Brand Equity as Revenue Lever: High NPS (42) and >80% brand recall indicates intangible assets directly support commercial success and customer loyalty.

1.4.7. Sustainability Integration: Digital campaigns promoting ESG initiatives attract younger demographics, linking brand identity to social responsibility.

1.4.8. Conversion vs. Awareness Balance: CTR (1.5–2.5%) and direct e-commerce sales illustrate an optimized balance between branding and revenue-generating campaigns.

1.4.9. Proprietary Media Ecosystem Advantage: Red Bull Media House functions as both content factory and revenue driver, raising entry barriers for competitors and amplifying earned media.

1.4.10. Data-Driven ROI: Demonstrated contribution of digital marketing ROI to profit margins (15–25%) provides empirical validation of marketing spend efficiency, supporting a measurable link between digital ecosystem investment and financial outcomes.



2. Red Bull's Digital Marketing Ecosystem: Core Constructs:

Digital Marketing Ecosystem (DME)

2.1. Components: Content creation, social media channels, Red Bull Media House, experiential campaigns.

2.2. Function: Serves as the strategic backbone, integrating entertainment, product promotion, and global storytelling.

- Regional Adaptation

I. Components: Localization of content, cultural alignment, regional influencer engagement, platform prioritization.

II. Function: Enhances relevance and engagement in diverse markets (North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific).

- Sustainability Integration

III. Components: ESG messaging, recyclable packaging, carbon footprint reduction.

IV. Function: Strengthens brand purpose, particularly among younger and environmentally conscious consumers.

- Audience Engagement

V. Metrics: Engagement Rate (ER), Share of Voice (SOV), Video View-Through Rate (VTR), User-Generated Content (UGC).

VI. Function: Captures attention, fosters participation, and encourages advocacy.

- Brand Equity

VII. Metrics: Net Promoter Score (NPS), Brand Recall, Brand Loyalty, Premium Positioning.

VIII. Function: Establishes trust, differentiation, and long-term competitive advantage.

- Revenue & Conversion

IX. Metrics: Click-Through Rate (CTR), E-commerce sales, ROI of campaigns.

X. Function: Converts digital interaction into measurable financial outcomes.

2.3. Causal Pathways in the Model:

2.3.1. DME → Audience Engagement

- High-quality content, experiential campaigns, and proprietary media assets drive engagement metrics across global audiences.

2.3.2. Regional Adaptation → Audience Engagement

- Localization of content and cultural resonance amplify engagement and UGC, ensuring higher regional relevance.

2.3.3. Sustainability Integration → Brand Equity

• ESG initiatives enhance brand perception and loyalty, particularly in regions sensitive to environmental responsibility.

2.3.4. Audience Engagement → Brand Equity

• High engagement fosters advocacy, recall, and loyalty, translating into stronger intangible brand assets.

2.3.5. Brand Equity → Revenue & Conversion

• Established brand trust and premium positioning increase CTR, e-commerce sales, and overall ROI.

2.4. Feedback Loops

• Revenue & Conversion → DME Investment: Success allows reinvestment into content creation, media infrastructure, and innovation.

• Audience Engagement ↔ Sustainability Integration: Positive reception of ESG messaging reinforces engagement and community-driven campaigns.

3. Critical Evaluation:

• Red Bull's digital marketing functions as an integrated ecosystem where content, media infrastructure, and experiential campaigns act as strategic assets rather than operational expenses.

• Regional adaptation ensures global reach while maintaining local relevance, increasing engagement and UGC generation.

• Sustainability integration serves dual purposes: reinforcing corporate purpose and enhancing brand equity among conscious consumers.

• Audience engagement is the central mediating construction, linking digital ecosystem and regional/ sustainability strategies to tangible brand equity.

- Brand equity mediates the impact of engagement on revenue, highlighting the indirect but measurable financial benefits of high-quality digital marketing investment.

- Strategic reinvestment creates a self-sustaining cycle, reinforcing proprietary media assets, global content dominance, and competitive barriers.

4.Conclusion

Red Bull is the foremost example of a brand that takes its brand image and goodwill to the next level through a strategy that categorizes promotion over product and emphasizes the target audience. The company has created a brand image that manifests a culture of pushing boundaries and taking risks. Red Bull Stratos was just an addition to this culture, and it precipitated the company into the global limelight. Their strategic PR stunt created a huge success for the company, as the Red Bull PR team carefully orchestrated the RACE model. The company has restructured the energy drink variety worldwide and has embellished an example of triumph in the soft drinks and beverages industry. This drink is mainly recognized as an energy drink suitable for active and athletic people. Brand equity also creates a significant position in the product selling and accreditation of the company. Branding is a prime part of accompanying loyal customers and expanding the number of buyers. Therefore, to obtain strong branding, the company's marketing approach is dominant and has contributed remarkably to the product recognition and brand equity of the company. However, the company also continually seeks to ameliorate its marketing to attract more customers. Its key factor remains the sponsorship of extreme sports and events to demonstrate its brand recognition. The brand has integrated itself with adrenaline-fueled activities like Formula 1 racing, snowboarding, and skydiving. This has positioned Red Bull as a lifestyle brand that stands for adventure and excitement while fabricating a sense of ownership and ambition among its consumer base.

The company also prioritised content marketing, which has set it apart from its competitors. Through its Red Bull Media

House initiative, the company has originated a wide variety of captivating content such as documentaries, videos, and articles that showcase extreme sports, music, and culture. By constructing engaging and shareable content, the company captivates viewers across digital platforms, reinforcing brand ethics and loyalty. Establishing product placement and collaborations has also helped to enlarge the brand's reach. The company partners with athletes, musicians, and influencers who share similar values and connect to its target demographic. This mutual relationship strengthens Red Bull's image while enhancing its integrity and authority.

Another foremost characteristic of Red Bull's marketing strategy is its storytelling capability. Through enthralling narratives and striking visuals, the brand successfully communicates its desirability and adventurous spirit. Whether documenting a daring skydiver's journey or capturing moments before and after major sports events, the company's storytelling resonates on an emotional level and strengthens brand loyalty. The company strategically uses guerilla marketing, earning an iconic place in the global marketing landscape. From energetic street promotions to creative installations, Red Bull pushes the limits of traditional advertising and consistently creates buzz. This reinforces its image as an innovative and forward-thinking brand. The company's innovation extends beyond marketing to product development, ensuring flexibility and adaptability that help it stay ahead in an increasingly competitive market. It also uses social media advertising and consumer preference analytics for strategy formulation and execution, reflecting its deep understanding of evolving consumer behaviour. Since its inception in Austria, Red Bull has segmented its markets based on demographic, geographic, and behavioural characteristics and differentiated itself through communication dominance and brand positioning. This approach nurtures a premium price image and a high-quality reputation. By blending European tastes with a global youth culture, Red Bull has become a symbol of passion and performance. Its expansion strategy demonstrates a credible and sustainable model of

global growth that aligns with the principles of responsible innovation and marketing ethics. Through strategic adaptation, sustainable packaging, and digital innovation, Red Bull not only sustains profitability but also contributes to transforming business and consumer culture worldwide. On the whole, it can be concluded that Red Bull is both profitable and pioneering in its marketing program. The brand's evolution reflects how innovation in marketing, sustainability in production, and an understanding of consumer psychology can collectively transform business, economy, and society making Red Bull a model of how creative strategy and sustainable practice can coexist to drive lasting success.

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From Reels to Real Life: Understanding Youth Identity and Well-Being in Bangladesh and India

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Abstract:

The student life embraces social media. The presence of Smartphones and fast internet keeps the students on Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok and YouTube hours on end. Short videos such as Reels influence psychology, self-identity, and social behavior of the users. Digital echo chambers are caused by encoding users with similar content using algorithm-based recommendations. This may increase self-esteem, body awareness, social comparison and stress more so among the students of the university. This paper will examine the effect of Reel use on mental health, self-identity, and focus on studies. It targets the students of Chittagong University and Dhaka University in Bangladesh and Jadavpur University and Calcutta University in India.

A mixed method was used to conduct the study. First of all, a survey of 200 students was organized online in order to measure their actual viewing patterns, emotional reactions, self-identity, and concentration. A qualitative analysis of 100 popular and viral reel content was then carried out to gain an insight into the content, style of presentation, and any possible psychological effect. The theory of the work was established on the ground of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cultivation Theory that prove useful in the analysis of the causes of youth content consumption and influence of repeated content. In the comparison of students in Bangladesh and India, the researcher observed that students in both countries consume similar online material. Bangladeshi students however, claim

more of the mental stress and less academic concentration with Indian students indicating more changes in the social acceptance and culture attitude. The results can be used by the students, teachers, and policymakers to enhance digital literacy, ensure safe online practices, and increase social awareness. It also provides research on the relationship between virtual and real-life experiences of the youth in South Asia today.

Keywords: Social Media Reels, Youth Identity, Mental Well-Being, Cross-National Study, Bangladesh, India

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of young people's daily lives. The widespread use of smartphones and high-speed internet keeps young people engaged on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube for hours a day (Montag et al., 2021; Tandoc et al., 2015). In particular, short-form video formats, such as 'reels', provide immediate entertainment as well as long-term effects on the user's psychology, self-identity, and social behavior (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Kross et al., 2013). Through algorithm-based content recommendation systems, users are almost unconsciously trapped in similar content, creating a digital "echo chamber" (Gerbner, 1998; Montag et al., 2021). This situation can increase social comparison, body consciousness, self-esteem, and stress levels among young people (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017; Balhara et al., 2021).

While international research has extensively discussed the positive and negative effects of social media, in-depth analysis of the impact of reels in the Bangladeshi context especially among university students is still limited. In addition, research on the comparative context between students in Bangladesh and India is significantly less. In order to fill this gap, the current study conducted a survey and content analysis on students from four reputable universities. The aim of the study was to determine how the use of reels affects the self-identity, social behavior, and mental well-being of young people.

2. Objectives of the study

The use of social media reels has various effects on the self-identity, behavior, and mental well-being of young people. Previous research has shown that short-form video content can have a significant impact on users' self-identity, body awareness, social comparison, and mental health (Tandoc et al., 2015; Balhara et al., 2021; Kross et al., 2013). At the same time, social media use affects attention to various academic tasks and daily performance (Radesky et al., 2020; Montag et al., 2021). Comparative studies of this effect among university students in Bangladesh and India are limited. This article considers three main aspects:

3.1. Self-identity and personality development: How Reels is contributing to the self-identity and personality development of young students.

3.2. Impact on mental health, self-confidence, and body awareness: Does short-form video content have a negative impact on students' mental health, self-confidence, and body awareness?

3.3. Academic Attention and Daily Performance: How Reels-based Content is Affecting Students' Concentration, Academic Attention, and Daily Performance.

The analysis of these three aspects reveals a comparative picture of social media usage and its impact among university students in Bangladesh and India (Rahman et al., 2022; Singh & Singh, 2021).

3. Scope and Area of the Study

The study will be conducted on 200 students of the Communication and Journalism Departments of four universities in Bangladesh and India. The survey will analyze the students' Reels viewing habits, time usage patterns, emotional responses to the content, and self-identity position. In addition, 100 popular and viral Reels content will be selected, and their content, presentation style, and impact will be analyzed.

The included universities are-

- Bangladesh: Chittagong University, Dhaka University
- India: Jadavpur University, Calcutta University

Rationale for selection-

Academic diversity, geographical and cultural representation, digital trends in students' use of social media, cross-boundary academic exchange, and joint research-collaboration practices.

4. Research Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach, which involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach is able to present a complete picture of young students' use of social media reels and its impact.

4.1 Quantitative Data: A total of 200 students from universities in Bangladesh and India were included through structured online questionnaires. The survey included the following topics:

- Daily duration of reel viewing and usage patterns
- Preferred content types
- Perceptions of mental health and self-confidence
- Changes in academic outcomes, attention, and concentration

Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis were used to analyze the quantitative data (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017; Rahman et al., 2022).

4.2 Qualitative Data: The text and frames of 100 popular and viral Reels content selected for qualitative data were analyzed. In addition, the workings of social media algorithms and the impact of content delivery were also reviewed to identify themes related to user experience, self-identity, and social comparison. Students' experiences and perspectives on digital usage were also collected through focus group discussions (Singh & Singh, 2021; Montag et al., 2021).

4.3 Ethical Considerations: The voluntary consent of the participants in the study was ensured. Due care was taken to ensure the confidentiality and sensitivity of personal information during data collection.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study uses two primary theoretical frameworks that are relevant to analyzing youth use of reels and their effects:

5.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974)

According to this theory, users use media to fulfill their personal needs and desires. In the context of reels, young people are mainly using content in four ways:

- Entertainment: A way to reduce daily stress and boredom.
- Information Seeking: Obtaining information about new topics, trends, or learning.
- Social Acceptance: Acceptance and participation in friends or social networks.
- Passing Time: Viewing entertaining content in leisure time.

This framework is helpful in determining the purpose of using reels and the psychological motivation of the user.

5.2 Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998)

According to Cultivation Theory, repeated exposure to the same media content influences users' perceptions of reality. In the context of Reels, this theory suggests that:

- Young people are adopting influencer culture, which influences their personal lives and social norms.
- Repeated exposure to the same content can increase dissatisfaction with real life and stress.

These two theoretical frameworks have been used together to analyze the motives, behavior, and mental health of young people using Reels.

6. Significance and Relevance of the Study

The significance of this study is multidimensional and important in a cross-boundary context. By analyzing the social, cultural, and educational similarities and differences of university students in Bangladesh and India, it has been possible to identify the impact of reels use, mental health, and diversity of self-identity (Rahman et al., 2022; Singh & Singh, 2021).

The way students use Reels in both countries affects their academic focus, concentration, and daily routines in different ways. The study's results can help improve digital literacy and encourage safer online habits. It also highlights how digital echo chambers can shape young people's online behavior and mental health worldwide.

7. Literature Review

The proliferation of digital media and the emergence of social media platforms are closely linked to the lives of young people. In particular, short-form video content, such as Instagram reels, Facebook shorts, and TikTok videos, are being used to meet young people's needs for entertainment, social communication, and information gathering (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Tandoc et al., 2015).

Reels and Self-Identity: Several studies have shown that continuous content viewing on social media platforms affects young people's self-identity and personality development. Users often define their identities based on popular trends, influencer culture, and peer reactions (Kross et al., 2013; Montag et al., 2021).

Mental Health and Body Consciousness: Regular use of short-form video content can lead to low self-esteem, increased social comparison, and stress (Balhara et al., 2021; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). According to Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, repeatedly viewing the same type of content distorts the user's perception of reality, which can increase students' mental health and dissatisfaction with life (Gerbner, 1998).

Academic Attention and Performance: Excessive time spent on online content affects students' concentration, academic attention, and daily performance. Short-form video content in particular can provide quick gratification, but in the long run, it can lead to decreased attention and negative effects on academic outcomes (Radesky et al., 2020; Singh & Singh, 2021).

Bangladesh and India contexts: There is limited research on the relationship between students' social media use and mental health in Bangladesh, where the specific impact of reels has been analyzed (Rahman et al., 2022). Comparative research on the impact of youth's use of short-form videos is also underway in the Indian context, but the cross-boundary impact between the two countries is still insufficiently studied (Singh & Singh, 2021; Montag et al., 2021).

8. Findings from Content Analysis

The study analyzed frames of 100 popular and viral Reels content. This analysis identified some important trends and patterns-

8.1 Content Type

Most Reels were entertainment (45%) dance, singing, comedy, and trend-based challenges, etc. This was followed by fashion and beauty-related content (20%), which can influence the body image and beauty consciousness of young people. Educational (15%) and social awareness/political (10%) content were relatively less common. Sports and other content were about 10%.

8.2 Algorithmic Pattern

The Reels algorithm repeatedly showed the same type of content, which locked users into a specific theme or pattern. For example, if someone watches a few fashion Reels, then later on, their feed would get a lot of similar content. This creates a digital echo chamber, where the user experience becomes undifferentiated.

8.3 Self-identity and social comparison

Many reels feature the so-called 'perfect lifestyle' living lavishly, using luxury goods, or displaying artificial beauty. This content can create social comparison, an inferiority complex, and self-esteem issues among young people.

8.4 Mental health implications

Content analysis has shown that the fast-paced and overly stimulating visual style of reels can sometimes increase restlessness, lack of concentration, and distraction. Students are trying to gain social acceptance by repeatedly participating in the same trends, which can increase stress and addiction.

8.5 Cultural characteristics

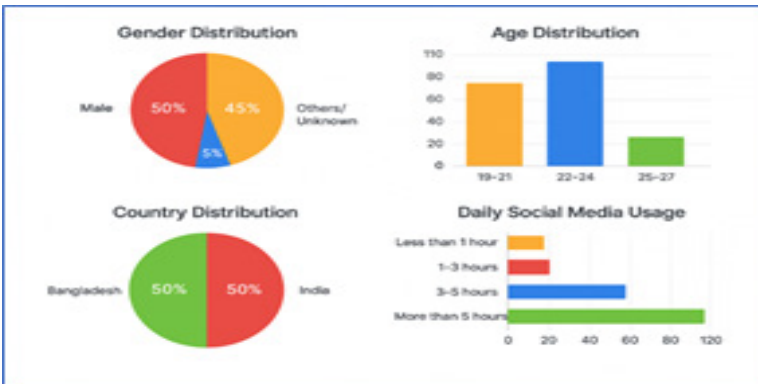
Some differences have been observed between Bangladeshi and Indian content. Indian reels are more influenced by Bollywood, fashion, and celebrity culture, while Bangladeshi reels are relatively more likely to feature local language, folk music, and social issue-based content. However, in both cases, the preponderance of entertainment and fashion-based content is evident.

Overall, content analysis indicates that Reels is primarily focused on entertainment, but also includes elements of self-identification, social comparison, and algorithmic addiction.

9. Survey results and findings

9.1. General information: Gender and age distribution: Half of the survey participants were male, and almost half were female. The majority of the participants (55%) were between 22 and 24 years of age, which proves that the main age group of university-level students is 20-24 years.

Country parity: Students from Bangladesh and India participated equally (50%-50%), which is suitable for cross-boundary comparisons.



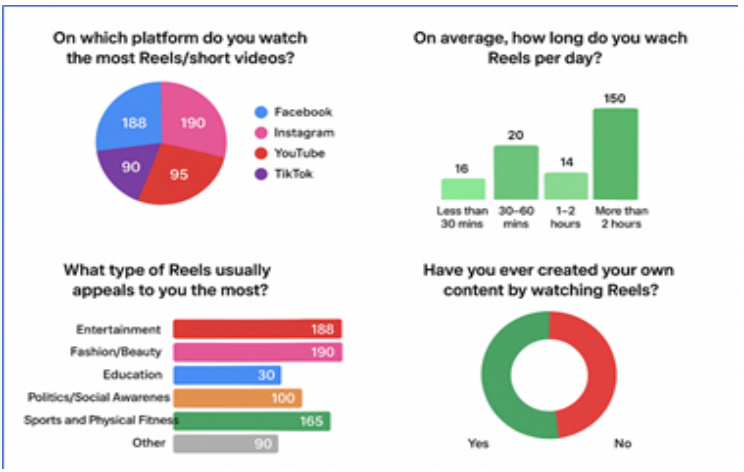
University parity: An equal number of students (25) from four universities participated in the survey, which makes it easy to collect comparative data from each institution.

Social media usage time: A large proportion of participants (87.5%) use social media for more than 3 hours a day, with 55% of users using it for more than 5 hours. This indicates that young students are heavily engaged with reels and other social media content.

5**9.2. Reels usage patterns and habits:** The study assessed the participants' usage patterns and habits of Reels or short videos. It was found that the highest number of participants viewed Reels on the Instagram platform (190), slightly more than Facebook (188). On the other hand, YouTube (90) and TikTok (95) were used by a smaller number of users. No users viewed Reels on 'other' platforms. This indicates that the popularity of Reels on social media is mainly limited to Instagram and Facebook. A clear trend was also observed regarding the average time spent watching Reels per day. 150 participants watched Reels for more than two hours per day, which represents a large proportion of the total number of participants. In comparison, 16 watched for less than 30 minutes, 20 watched for 30–60 minutes, and 14 watched for 1–2 hours.

This data suggests that most users watch Reels for a long time per day, which may affect their time management. The

survey also found some important implications regarding the type of Reels. Entertainment Reels (188 people) and fashion/beauty-related Reels (190 people) are the most popular among users. In addition, Reels related to sports and physical fitness (165 people) and politics/social awareness (100 people) are also quite popular. Educational Reels are found to be more interesting by 80 people, and other types of Reels are popular among 90 users. This indicates that users mainly select Reels based on entertainment and personal interests. The Reels users' habits of creating their own content were also surveyed. It was found that most users (188 people) have created their own content after watching Reels, while only 12 have never created content. This proves that the tendency of creativity and participation is very high among Reels users.



Finally, the survey also found information about the impact of using Reels. 60 participants felt that Reels waste their time or disrupt their concentration, 45 did not think so, and 95 said that it sometimes happens. This suggests that while Reels are important for entertainment and education, their excessive use can be a time-waster or distraction for some users.

Overall, the study results indicate that Reels have had a profound impact on users' daily lives and entertainment habits on social media. Users primarily view Reels on Instagram and

Facebook platforms for extended periods of time, based on entertainment and personal interests, and many create their own content from these experiences. However, excessive use can lead to distraction in some cases.

9.3. Self-Identity, Mental Health, and Self-Esteem: The study assessed the impact of the reels on the participants' self-identity, mental health, and self-esteem. It was found that a large proportion of the participants (120 yes and 160 sometimes) expressed a tendency to compare their lives with others after watching the reels. Only 40 participants said they never made such comparisons. This indicates that comparing themselves to the lifestyles displayed on social media has become a common mental habit. The 'perfect lifestyle' displayed in the reels can affect the mental health of users. 54 participants in the survey felt inferiority or depression, while 120 expressed this feeling sometimes. Only 26 participants said they never felt such pressure. The study also found important information about concerns about body shape or beauty. 150 participants said their anxiety increased after watching the reels, 10 sometimes, and 40 never felt anxiety. This indicates that content about body beauty or fitness is directly affecting users' self-esteem. Reels can also affect users' self-confidence and social acceptance. 25 participants said yes, their self-confidence or social acceptance is affected, 130 said sometimes, and 45 said no. This indicates that many users sometimes feel the impact of Reels on social acceptance and self-confidence.

The survey also found information on the impact on academic focus and studies. 55 participants felt that Reels were affecting their studies, 26 said no, and 119 were not sure. This indicates that the impact of Reels on academic focus is not direct, but can create doubt and instability.

Overall, the results of the study prove that Reels has a significant impact on users' mental health, self-esteem, and self-identity. Users are particularly concerned about comparing their lives, bodies, and social acceptance due to the 'perfect lifestyle' and fitness/beauty content.

9.4. Family and Social Influence: At this stage of the survey, the students were asked - Does your family know that you regularly watch Reels? The study found that most of the participants' families are aware of their Reels use. Out of a total of 200, 190 (95%) reported that their family knows that they regularly use Reels, while only 5 (2.5%) did not report it, and another 5 (2.5%) refrained from giving an opinion. This indicates that the use of Reels is largely open to the participants' families.

The question was whether they feel competition with family or friends regarding showing or making Reels? Out of a total of 200, 105 (52.5%) participants reported that they feel some competition with family or friends in showing or making Reels. On the other hand, 70 (35%) said that they do not feel such competition, and 25 (12.5%) refrained from giving an opinion on this issue. The results suggest that social networks and family environment have a certain influence on the use of Reels, and many are considering it as a competitive social activity.

The question at this stage of the research survey was - Have Reels affected your social relationships or spending time with your family? The results of the study showed that 147 (73.5%) of the 200 participants felt that Reels had an impact on their social relationships or spending time with their family. 20 (10%) felt that there was no such impact, and 33 (16.5%) said that they sometimes felt the impact. This indicates that there are significant changes in the time management of family and social relationships due to the use of Reels on mobile platforms.

The results of the study show that the use of mobile Reels is not only a means of personal entertainment, but it also has an effective impact on the family and social context. Most users tell their families about the use of Reels, and many feel a sense of competition in this use with family or friends. In addition, almost three-quarters of the users feel that it is affecting their social relationships or spending time with their family.

9.5. Algorithms, addiction, and cross-national habits: The study found that a large portion of Reels users acknowledge the influence of the algorithm. About 170 people often noticed that if they watched more of the same type of Reels, the platform showed them more of that content. On the other hand, only 30 users did not experience this. In addition, signs of addiction were also observed among users. 165 users admitted that they had decided not to watch Reels, but later lost control and watched Reels again. Only 35 users had not experienced such a situation.

The results show that Reels' algorithm is influencing users' viewing habits, and it is sometimes giving rise to addictive behavior.

10. Analysis of Results

10.1. Reels Usage and Time Pattern: The survey found that the amount of time students spend watching Reels daily varied. Many watch videos for 30–60 minutes a day. Instagram and Facebook are the most used platforms.

Analysis: The high time usage is mainly due to entertainment and social interaction. This shows that students are using Reels as an escapism or a source of joy during daily stress or free time.

10.2. Algorithm and Habitual Effects: In the study, students mentioned that after watching Reels more, the platform automatically shows the same type of content.

Analysis: This algorithmic process is reinforcing user habits. Students are getting addicted to the same type of content instead of new content, which can affect time management and attention in the long run.

10.3. Social and Family Effects: According to the survey, most students' families know about their Reels viewing. Many express a sense of competition with friends or family over Reels. Some students said that spending time with family is being affected by watching Reels.

Analysis: This indicates that Reels are not only entertainment,

but also play an important role in social competition and relational change.

10.4. Lifestyle and psychological impact: Students feel pressure or anxiety by comparing their lives with the lifestyles of others. In addition, concerns about body image or lifestyle have also been observed.

Analysis: The content of Reels can affect students' mental health. It is related to increased self-esteem, social pressure, and mental stress.

10.5. Cross-national or university-based variation: Different patterns and times of use of Reels have been observed among students from different universities.

Analysis: The social and cultural influence of place or educational institution is affecting the use and engagement of Reels.

10.6. Other behavioural patterns: The habit of creating, sharing, liking, or commenting on Reels has been observed among students.

Analysis: This indicates that students are not just passive viewers, but are participating in participatory culture. Engagement behaviour is related to social relationships, popularity, and self-expression.

11. Discussion

Some important aspects emerged from the analysis of the survey and research results related to Reels or short videos:

11.1. Daily use and time patterns: Students watch Reels for a significant amount of time every day, especially on Instagram and Facebook platforms.

Discussion: This indicates that students are using Reels as a primary means of entertainment and social communication. In the long run, this can have an impact on time management and the learning process.

11.2. Algorithm and habituation effects: Repeated viewing of the same type of content leads users to see more similar

content.

Discussion: This reinforces the user's habit, which can increase the risk of addiction. This habit is related to students' stress and attentional division.

11.3. Social and family effects: The survey found that many students expressed a sense of competition when watching Reels with family and friends.

Discussion: This indicates that Reels is not only entertainment, but also a factor in social competition and interpersonal relationships.

11.4. Psychological and lifestyle effects: Students experience stress or anxiety by comparing their lives with the lifestyles of others. Concerns about body image or lifestyle have also been observed.

Discussion: This is how social media content affects students' mental health and is related to self-esteem and stress.

11.5. Behavioural patterns and participatory culture: Students are not just passive viewers, but also show engagement by creating, sharing, liking or commenting on reels.

Discussion: This is part of participatory culture, which is related to social relationships, self-expression, and online popularity.

That is, the survey and analysis indicate that the impact of reels use is multidimensional entertainment, social, psychological, and behavioural.

12. Conclusion

The growing influence of social media is deeply affecting the self-identity, mental health, and social relationships of the young people of both countries. A comparative analysis of university students in Bangladesh and India will provide useful guidance for policymakers, teachers, and parents. This study will serve as a contemporary lesson in understanding the intersection of virtual and physical reality in the present era, which will help to consciously protect the young generation

of both countries from the impact of digital reality. The use of reels is affecting students' daily lives, mental health, and social behaviour. In line with the objectives of the study, the findings clearly indicate that reels are not only a means of entertainment, but also an important part of students' behaviour and lifestyle. The results of the study showed that students spend a significant amount of time watching reels or short videos every day, with Instagram and Facebook being the most used platforms. The platform's algorithms are attracting students to similar content, which can affect time management and attention. At the same time, the use of reels is also affecting students' family and social relationships; many express a sense of competition with friends or family, and spend less time with family. In addition, students experience stress and anxiety by comparing their lives with those of others, which can affect self-esteem and mental health. Students are not just passive viewers, but are actively participating by creating, sharing, and liking or commenting on reels, which is related to online engagement and self-expression as part of a participatory culture. In summary, the use of reels is affecting students' daily lives, mental health, and social behavior in many ways. The findings of the study clearly indicate that reels are not just a means of entertainment, but an important part of students' behavior and lifestyle.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis of the study, some recommendations can be made:

13.1. Time management and conscious use

Advise students to set aside time for Reels and other social media. Organize awareness programs on 'Digital Wellbeing' from universities or educational institutions.

13.2. Mental health awareness

Counselling or peer support systems to reduce stress. Make students aware of the content of social media and the effects of life comparison.

13.3. Social and family harmony

Consciously maintain digital balance to spend time with family and friends. Guidance for positive social interaction and competition management among students.

13.4. Guidelines for participatory culture

Teach students safety, privacy, and ethical guidelines in content creation. Promote creative engagement on academic or co-curricular platforms.

13.5. Recommendations for future research

Comparative research with students of other ages, universities, or countries. Longitudinal study on long-term psychological impact and time-use patterns.

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From Public Debate to Algorithmic Mediation: Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Civic Discourse

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and algorithmic systems have become central to contemporary digital communication, profoundly influencing the structures, dynamics, and ethics of civic discourse. As political debates, public deliberation, and social interactions increasingly migrate to digital platforms, algorithms determine which content is visible, which perspectives gain traction, and how individuals engage with one another. This paper explores the multifaceted impact of AI and algorithms on civic discourse, combining theoretical analysis with empirical and normative perspectives. It examines how algorithmic mediation affects inclusivity, polarisation, misinformation, and democratic participation. Special attention is given to ethical considerations, power asymmetries, and implications for civic engagement in both Global North and Global South contexts. The study concludes with reflections on the future of public deliberation in an algorithmically structured environment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, algorithms, civic discourse, digital public sphere, democratic participation, algorithmic mediation

1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies has reshaped the contours of public communication and civic engagement.

Civic discourse the deliberative exchange of ideas, opinions, and arguments in the public sphere is increasingly mediated by computational systems that prioritise content based on engagement metrics, predictive algorithms, and behavioural data. This shift has profound implications for democratic societies, raising questions about the nature of public debate, citizen participation, and the ethics of algorithmic governance.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer confined to technical or industrial applications; it has become a central actor in digital communication ecosystems. From social media feeds to automated news recommendations, AI systems filter, amplify, and suppress information in ways that fundamentally alter public perception. Algorithms dictate which narratives gain prominence and which voices remain marginalised, often invisibly shaping the democratic process.

In this context, civic discourse is no longer purely a product of human deliberation; it is co-constructed with algorithmic systems. Scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors must grapple with questions of transparency, accountability, and fairness. Understanding the influence of AI and algorithms on civic discourse is essential for safeguarding democratic deliberation and ensuring that public spaces remain inclusive, informative, and participatory.

This paper examines these dynamics by integrating conceptual frameworks, empirical studies, and normative debates. It addresses the following core research questions:

How do AI and algorithmic systems mediate civic discourse on digital platforms?

What are the ethical and democratic implications of algorithmically curated public debates?

How do power asymmetries manifest in algorithmically structured discourse?

What comparative insights can be drawn from Global North and Global South experiences?

By answering these questions, the paper contributes to the growing scholarship on digital democracy, computational propaganda, and algorithmic governance, while offering practical insights for policymakers, platform designers, and civic actors.

2. Conceptualising Artificial Intelligence and Algorithms

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to a broad set of computational approaches that enable machines to perform tasks traditionally associated with human cognition, such as learning, reasoning, language comprehension, and pattern recognition. Contemporary AI systems commonly rely on techniques including machine learning, natural language processing, computer vision, and predictive analytics to identify correlations within large datasets and generate probabilistic outcomes (Russell & Norvig, 2021). In contrast, algorithms represent the foundational procedural instructions that guide how data is processed, organised, and acted upon within computational systems. While all AI systems are algorithmic in nature, not all algorithms qualify as AI, particularly those that operate through fixed, rule-based logic without adaptive learning capabilities.

In digital communication environments, algorithms play a central role in structuring information flows. They determine which content is surfaced, prioritised, or suppressed, shaping users' exposure to news, political narratives, and civic discussions. Algorithmic processes govern content ranking, recommendation systems, search visibility, and automated moderation, thereby functioning as powerful intermediaries between information producers and audiences (Bucher, 2018). In this sense, algorithmic systems increasingly perform a gatekeeping function that was historically exercised by journalists and editors, albeit through computational rather than editorial judgment. The distinction between algorithms and AI becomes particularly salient when examining learning and adaptability. Rule-based algorithms operate according to predefined instructions for example, presenting content in chronological order or filtering posts using explicit criteria.

AI-driven systems, by contrast, incorporate feedback mechanisms that allow them to learn from user behaviour and modify outputs dynamically. Recommendation engines powered by machine learning analyse engagement patterns such as clicks, viewing time, and sharing behaviour to predict future user preferences, thereby continuously reshaping individual information environments (Diakopoulos, 2019).

Although such systems are often promoted for their efficiency and personalisation benefits, their optimization logic raises normative concerns for democratic communication. Most AI-mediated platforms are designed to maximise engagement metrics because these indicators align with commercial objectives. However, engagement-driven optimisation does not necessarily support deliberative democratic ideals. Research demonstrates that algorithmic systems frequently amplify sensational, emotionally charged, or polarising content, as such material is more likely to elicit user interaction (Tufekci, 2015). As a result, complex policy discussions, minority viewpoints, and nuanced debate may be algorithmically disadvantaged.

2.1. India-Specific Context of AI and Algorithmic Mediation

The implications of AI and algorithmic mediation acquire heightened significance in the Indian digital ecosystem, which is characterised by linguistic diversity, high mobile-internet penetration, and the dominance of platform-based communication. Social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and video-sharing services have become central arenas for political expression and civic engagement in India. Algorithms operating within these platforms mediate discourse across multiple languages and cultural contexts, often with uneven accuracy and sensitivity. AI-driven recommendation and moderation systems trained predominantly on English or standardised Hindi datasets frequently struggle to interpret vernacular expressions, satire, and region-specific political idioms, leading to inconsistent moderation outcomes.

Moreover, the scale of digital participation in India amplifies the societal consequences of algorithmic decision-making. Engagement-based ranking systems can rapidly elevate particular narratives during electoral periods, sometimes enabling the viral circulation of misleading or polarising content. At the same time, political actors increasingly deploy data-driven strategies to optimise messaging for algorithmic visibility, reinforcing asymmetries of power between well-resourced political organisations and grassroots civic voices. In this context, AI systems do not merely mediate political communication; they actively shape the contours of public debate, voter perception, and democratic participation within one of the world's largest and most diverse democracies.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining algorithmic gatekeeping, networked public sphere theory, and deliberative democracy to conceptualize the role of AI in civic discourse.

First, the concept of algorithmic gatekeeping extends traditional gatekeeping theory by examining how computational systems, rather than human editors, determine information visibility and relevance. Algorithms function as non-human gatekeepers that prioritize content based on engagement metrics and predictive models, thereby influencing agenda formation and public attention (Bucher, 2018; Diakopoulos, 2019).

Second, the framework engages with theories of the networked public sphere, which emphasise how digital platforms restructure public communication by enabling decentralised participation while simultaneously concentrating power within platform architectures. AI-driven mediation shapes how citizens encounter political information, interact with diverse viewpoints, and participate in public discourse, often reinforcing homophily and ideological clustering. Finally, the study is informed by deliberative democratic theory, which stresses the importance of reasoned debate, inclusivity, and exposure to diverse perspectives in democratic societies.

From this perspective, engagement-optimised AI systems present a normative challenge, as their tendency to privilege emotionally charged or polarising content can undermine the conditions necessary for meaningful public deliberation (Tufekci, 2015).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the framework positions AI not merely as a technical infrastructure but as a socio-political actor that shapes democratic communication processes. This approach enables a critical examination of how algorithmic systems influence civic discourse, power relations, and democratic outcomes, particularly within the Indian digital context.

3. Civic Discourse in the Digital Public Sphere

Civic discourse constitutes the communicative foundation of democratic life, encompassing the circulation of ideas, contestation of viewpoints, and negotiation of collective concerns among citizens. It is through sustained civic dialogue that public opinion is formed and democratic legitimacy is reinforced. Classical democratic theory situates such discourse within shared communicative spaces where participants are able to articulate arguments, challenge authority, and deliberate on matters of public interest. Habermas's (1989) formulation of the public sphere emphasized rational-critical debate conducted under conditions of relative equality, where the force of better arguments, rather than social power or economic influence, shaped outcomes.

In contemporary societies, the public sphere has undergone a significant structural transformation as civic discourse increasingly unfolds within digital environments. Online platforms including social networking sites, discussion forums, video-sharing applications, comment sections of news portals, and digital petition platforms now function as primary arenas for political expression and civic engagement. These spaces extend participation beyond traditional elites, allowing individuals and groups to contribute to public debate regardless of geographic or institutional constraints. Digital communication thus reconfigures the scale, speed, and

inclusivity of civic discourse, enabling rapid dissemination of information and near-instantaneous interaction among citizens and political actors. The expansion of the digital public sphere has enhanced opportunities for political mobilization and participatory engagement. Citizens can organize collective action, respond to policy developments in real time, and directly address political representatives through online channels. The interactive affordances of digital media blur the boundaries between information producers and consumers, fostering a more participatory communicative environment (Chadwick, 2017). From grassroots campaigns to issue-based advocacy, digital platforms have lowered barriers to entry for civic participation, potentially strengthening democratic responsiveness.

However, the digital public sphere is not a neutral communicative space. It is shaped by platform architectures, economic incentives, and governance mechanisms that structure how discourse unfolds. Platform design choices such as interface layouts, engagement metrics, and content ranking systems significantly influence which voices are amplified and which remain marginal. Monetization models reliant on advertising revenue further incentivize platforms to maximize user attention, often privileging content that generates high levels of interaction. As a result, the normative conditions envisioned in deliberative democratic theory such as equality of participation, reflexivity, and reasoned argumentation are mediated by computational and commercial logics rather than purely communicative ones.

A defining feature of digital civic discourse is the role of algorithmic personalization in shaping information exposure. Recommendation systems curate content based on inferred user preferences, engagement histories, and network connections. While such personalization enhances relevance and user satisfaction, it also restructures the informational environment in ways that may limit deliberative diversity. By selectively foregrounding content aligned with existing attitudes, algorithmic systems can reduce encounters with alternative perspectives and weaken the integrative function of the public sphere.

The emergence of filter bubbles and echo chambers further complicates the democratic potential of digital discourse. These phenomena arise when users are repeatedly exposed to homogenous viewpoints within ideologically aligned networks, reinforcing prior beliefs and reducing opportunities for contestation (Pariser, 2011). Over time, such fragmentation can erode shared understandings of political reality, intensify affective polarization, and undermine the possibility of consensus-building. Civic discourse, rather than functioning as a space of mutual reasoning, risks becoming segmented into parallel communicative spheres with limited cross-ideological interaction. Moreover, the velocity and scale of digital communication introduce additional challenges for deliberative quality. The rapid circulation of information prioritizes immediacy over reflection, often favouring emotional resonance over argumentative depth. Short-form content, visual cues, and virality-driven dynamics reshape how political ideas are expressed and interpreted. In this environment, civic discourse is increasingly performative and reactive, shaped by visibility metrics rather than sustained engagement with complex issues.

Taken together, these transformations suggest that the digital public sphere represents both an expansion and a reconfiguration of civic discourse. While digital platforms have broadened participation and enabled new forms of political engagement, they have also introduced structural constraints that challenge deliberative ideals. Understanding civic discourse in the digital age therefore requires moving beyond normative assumptions of openness and inclusivity to critically examine the technological, economic, and algorithmic forces that shape public communication. Such an approach is essential for assessing the democratic implications of AI-mediated platforms and for envisioning governance frameworks that support more inclusive and deliberative digital publics.

4. Algorithmic Mediation of Public Debate

Algorithmic mediation refers to the process by which algorithm's structure, filter, and prioritize information in digital spaces. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube rely on recommendation engines that analyse user behaviour and predict engagement patterns. These systems determine which posts appear in news feeds, which videos are suggested, and which trending topics gain prominence.

4.1 Personalization and Visibility

Personalization algorithms tailor content to individual users based on historical data. While personalization enhances relevance and engagement, it can also create informational silos. Users are more likely to encounter content that aligns with their existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Sunstein, 2017).

4.2 Amplification of Extremes

Empirical studies reveal that algorithmically mediated platforms disproportionately amplify extreme or sensational content because such material generates higher engagement. This amplification can distort civic discourse by overrepresenting fringe perspectives and underrepresenting moderate or nuanced viewpoints (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

4.3 Automated Moderation and Bias

AI-driven content moderation is increasingly used to remove harmful or inappropriate content. However, automated moderation systems are prone to errors and biases, particularly in non-English contexts or culturally diverse regions (Gillespie, 2018). Such biases can inadvertently silence marginalized voices, further shaping the contours of civic discourse.

4.4 Misinformation and Computational Propaganda

AI systems are also leveraged to generate and disseminate false or misleading information. Computational propaganda refers to the strategic use of algorithms, bots, and automated

content to manipulate public opinion (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). Such practices undermine the epistemic foundations of civic discourse by creating uncertainty, spreading disinformation, and reducing trust in public institutions.

5. Impacts on Democratic Participation

Algorithmic mediation of civic discourse significantly influences democratic participation. Digital platforms, guided by AI, have reshaped the ways citizens engage with political content, political actors, and fellow citizens. While some scholars argue that these tools democratize access to information, others highlight how algorithms can exacerbate inequalities in civic engagement (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

5.1 Increased Engagement and Mobilization

AI and algorithms can enhance political participation by making relevant content more visible and by mobilizing citizens around causes or campaigns. Tools like personalized notifications, microtargeted advertisements, and AI-driven polling enable political actors to reach previously disengaged demographics (Kreiss, 2016). Social media platforms also allow grassroots movements to organize rapidly, demonstrating AI's capacity to facilitate collective action.

5.2 Unequal Access and Representation

Despite these advantages, AI-mediated civic engagement is not equally distributed. Algorithmic systems often prioritize content from established actors or those with higher engagement histories, inadvertently marginalizing minority or less-connected voices. This selective amplification can reduce the diversity of perspectives in the public sphere, undermining inclusive deliberation (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

5.3 Polarization and Echo Chambers

Algorithmically curated content frequently exposes users to ideologically homogeneous material, fostering echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs. This selective exposure has

been linked to increased political polarization, reduced willingness to consider opposing viewpoints, and diminished compromise in democratic processes (Sunstein, 2017). Civic discourse, ideally a space for reasoned debate, becomes fragmented into ideologically isolated clusters.

5.4 Manipulation and Strategic Targeting

AI enables microtargeting, a process whereby content is customized for specific individuals based on their demographic profile, behavioural patterns, and interests. While this can enhance engagement, it also opens avenues for manipulation. Computational propaganda and targeted disinformation campaigns can distort perceptions, sway opinions, and influence electoral outcomes without the broader public's awareness (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

6. Ethical Challenges and Power Asymmetries

Algorithmic mediation introduces complex ethical challenges that require careful consideration. The design, implementation, and governance of AI systems in civic discourse create power asymmetries between platform providers, political actors, and citizens.

6.1 Transparency and Accountability

AI algorithms are often opaque, with proprietary mechanisms that are not publicly accessible. This opacity hinders accountability, making it difficult to determine how and why certain content is promoted or suppressed. Citizens have limited capacity to contest algorithmic decisions, raising normative concerns about fairness in democratic participation (Bucher, 2018).

6.2 Bias and Discrimination

Algorithms inherit biases present in their training data, which can reflect societal prejudices. For instance, content moderation systems may disproportionately flag posts from minority communities, and recommendation systems may favor content that aligns with dominant cultural narratives (Gillespie, 2018). Such biases reproduce systemic inequalities within the digital public sphere.

6.3 Misinformation and Epistemic Responsibility

AI-generated misinformation poses a threat to the epistemic integrity of civic discourse. Deepfakes, automated bots, and tailored fake news exploit cognitive biases, undermining trust in information sources. The responsibility for mitigating misinformation is distributed across platform designers, policymakers, and users, but enforcement is inconsistent, leading to an ethical vacuum (DiResta, 2018).

6.4 Surveillance and Privacy Concerns

AI-mediated platforms often rely on extensive data collection, tracking user behavior to optimize content delivery. This surveillance raises privacy concerns and can influence citizens' willingness to express political opinions openly, potentially chilling free speech in digital forums (Zuboff, 2019).

7. Global South and Comparative Perspectives

While much literature on AI and algorithms emphasizes Western contexts, the Global South experiences unique dynamics that shape civic discourse.

7.1 Contextual Differences

Digital infrastructure, literacy levels, and platform adoption vary widely in the Global South, affecting how AI mediates discourse. In countries with lower internet penetration, algorithmic content may disproportionately influence politically active online populations, leaving offline communities underrepresented (Milan & Treré, 2019).

7.2 Language and Cultural Mediation

AI systems often struggle with non-dominant languages and local dialects. For instance, natural language processing models may underperform in regional languages, reducing the inclusivity and effectiveness of AI-mediated civic communication (Guha et al., 2025). In multilingual societies, this bias can marginalize linguistic minorities in public deliberation.

7.3 Political Risks and Regulation

Governments in the Global South may use AI for surveillance, election monitoring, or content control. While such applications can curb misinformation, they also risk consolidating state power, suppressing dissent, and limiting freedom of expression (Howard, Ganesh, & Liotsiou, 2021). Civic discourse in these contexts is simultaneously empowered and constrained by technological and political structures.

8 India-Specific Case Examples of Ethical Challenges of AI in Civic Discourse

8.1. Algorithmic Amplification of Political Misinformation on WhatsApp

During national and state elections, encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp have become key arenas of political communication in India. Although messages are privately circulated, AI-driven forwarding patterns and engagement metrics indirectly shape content virality. Politically motivated misinformation—often framed in emotive or religious language—travels rapidly across groups, making fact-checking and accountability difficult. The ethical concern lies in AI-assisted virality without corresponding transparency or corrective mechanisms, which undermines informed electoral choice.

8.2. Vernacular Language Bias in Content Moderation

India's linguistic diversity poses a significant challenge for automated moderation systems. AI tools trained primarily on English or dominant Hindi datasets frequently fail to detect hate speech, misinformation, or political manipulation in regional languages such as Bengali, Tamil, or Bhojpuri. As a result, harmful content may remain unmoderated, while legitimate political criticism or satire is sometimes incorrectly flagged. This uneven moderation raises ethical concerns regarding linguistic inequality and freedom of expression.

8.3. Political Micro-Targeting and Voter Manipulation

AI-driven data analytics enable political parties and consultants in India to segment voters based on caste, religion, region, and online behavior. Targeted political advertising, customized narratives, and emotionally charged messaging are deployed to influence specific voter groups. While legal frameworks attempt to regulate campaign communication, the ethical challenge lies in the opacity of AI-based profiling, which compromises voter autonomy and informed consent.

8.4. Trending Algorithms and Agenda Distortion

Social media platforms in India frequently use algorithmic "trending" features to highlight popular political topics. However, coordinated activity by organized groups or automated accounts can manipulate these algorithms to artificially inflate certain narratives. This results in distorted public agendas, where manufactured trends overshadow grassroots concerns such as employment, health, or education. Ethically, such algorithmic distortion weakens democratic deliberation by privileging visibility over substantive public interest.

8.5. AI-Enabled Surveillance and Chilling Effects on Civic Speech

The increasing use of AI-assisted monitoring tools for online speech moderation and law-and-order purposes has raised concerns about surveillance. When citizens perceive that political expression is continuously monitored or algorithmically flagged, self-censorship becomes common. In India's democratic context, this chilling effect threatens open civic participation and disproportionately affects activists, journalists, and marginalized communities.

8.6. Disinformation Ecosystems on Video Platforms

Video-based platforms, including short-form content applications, rely heavily on recommendation algorithms optimized for watch time and engagement. In India, political misinformation packaged as opinion videos or "news commentary" often receives algorithmic amplification. Ethical

concerns arise when AI systems prioritize engagement metrics over informational integrity, enabling misleading narratives to reach mass audiences without adequate verification.

8.7. Unequal Access to Algorithmic Visibility

Grassroots movements, independent journalists, and civil society organizations in India often lack the technical expertise or financial resources required to optimize content for algorithmic visibility. Conversely, well-resourced political actors can strategically adapt messaging to platform algorithms. This creates an ethical imbalance in civic discourse, where algorithmic power reinforces existing political inequalities.

8.8. Analytical Significance

These cases demonstrate that ethical challenges in AI-mediated civic discourse in India are not merely technical but deeply political and social. They intersect with issues of linguistic diversity, electoral integrity, data governance, and democratic participation, underscoring the need for context-sensitive AI regulation and ethical design.

9. Future of Civic Discourse in an Algorithmic Era

9.1 Designing Transparent and Ethical AI

The future of civic discourse depends on algorithmic transparency, participatory governance, and ethical AI design. Open-source algorithms, explainable AI, and inclusive data practices can mitigate biases and increase trust in digital public spheres (Cath et al., 2018).

9.2 Enhancing Civic Literacy

Digital literacy programs can equip citizens with the skills to navigate algorithmically mediated spaces critically. By fostering understanding of personalization, echo chambers, and AI-driven content moderation, societies can enhance the deliberative quality of civic discourse (Flew et al., 2019).

9.3 Regulatory Frameworks

Policymakers must develop frameworks that balance platform accountability, user rights, and innovation. This includes content transparency requirements, anti-manipulation measures, and enforcement mechanisms to prevent algorithmic abuse while preserving freedom of expression (Rahman & Panda, 2022).

9.4 Algorithmic Civic Platforms

Future platforms may integrate AI in ways that actively enhance deliberation rather than merely optimizing engagement. For example, AI could identify underrepresented voices, promote cross-ideological dialogue, and reduce polarization by highlighting credible, balanced content (Benkler et al., 2018).

10. Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence and algorithmic systems have fundamentally transformed civic discourse, influencing which voices are heard, which narratives are amplified, and how citizens engage with public debate. While algorithms enhance accessibility, engagement, and mobilization, they also introduce challenges including polarization, bias, misinformation, and unequal representation. Ethical and democratic considerations must guide the design and governance of AI-mediated platforms. Transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and literacy are essential to preserve the integrity of civic discourse. Furthermore, the Global South offers critical insights into the uneven impacts of AI, emphasizing the importance of contextualized, culturally sensitive approaches to digital public spheres. Ultimately, civic discourse in the algorithmic era is a co-constructed space where human deliberation and computational processes intersect. Ensuring that these intersections support democracy, inclusivity, and ethical engagement remain one of the central challenges of contemporary society.

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Impact of Social Media on Health Awareness of Female Santhali Teenagers and Adolescents of Bolpur

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Abstract

The widespread use of social media in recent years has changed how teenagers and young adults connect, get information, and develop their awareness of health and wellbeing. In the Bolpur districts of West Bengal, India, where significant indigenous Santhal communities are concentrated, the study investigates the effects of social media on health awareness among female Santhal teenagers and adolescents. The study looks into how digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp raise awareness of issues including mental health, illness prevention, nutrition, reproductive and menstrual health, personal hygiene, and access to health-related services. Social media has a particularly important role as a developing platform for informal health communication in India, given the socio-cultural and economic marginalisation of tribal populations. A hybrid research design was used, combining focus groups, interviews, and survey research. Both school-age and non-school-age girls from various socioeconomic backgrounds with differing degrees of digital exposure made up the sample. The following factors were examined: the degree of social media use, the reason for using it, the types of health-related content viewed, the opinion of the reliability of online content, and behavioural shifts connected to health consciousness. The outcome shows that many Santhal girls may now directly obtain health information or receive it through peer-shared messages thanks to the growing availability of smartphones and reasonably priced internet connection. Menstrual hygiene, vaccination, anaemia

prevention, nutrition, and sanitation practices have all become more widely known thanks to government health initiatives, NGOs, influencer-based content, and health-related educational videos.

But it also highlights significant hazards and limitations, such as infrastructure deficiencies in isolated communities, patriarchal control over technology use, and digital inequalities brought on by financial limitations. The majority of participants reported having low levels of digital literacy, which led to the uncritical consumption of false material, fallacies about home remedies, and unsubstantiated medical claims that circulated on social media. Teenagers are frequently forced to rely on their peers rather than real medical professionals for advice due to cultural taboos surrounding mental and reproductive health. The study also lists psychological issues like anxiety related to one's body, social comparison, and excessive exposure to unrealistic lifestyle representations. Despite these problems, community-mediated and school-based digital engagement proved to be a much more effective means of linking young people from tribal communities and medical facilities. Social networking sites turned out to be an addition to healthcare programs rather than a substitute when used by educators, medical experts, or mothers. This study has come to the conclusion that social networking sites have a lot of potential to raise the healthcare awareness levels of young Santhal women. However, their effectiveness requires good communication, content validation, and a digital healthcare awareness plan. According to this study, healthcare empowerment for girls in tribal communities requires region-specific healthcare awareness programs and more indigenous input in the development of healthcare communication strategies.

Keywords: Social media, Santhal Community, Empowerment, Indigenous, Health Awareness

1. **Introduction**

One of India's most notable oldest ethnic groups, the Santhal tribe, is primarily found in West Bengal's Bolpur. Due to a

lack of wangle to pertinent information, sexuality adolescents in these locations commonly struggle with issues of sex education, sanitation, and cleanliness. One possible way to tropical this information gap is through the growth of digital channels, particularly social media with reels and podcasts. Developing successful educational interventions requires an understanding of how these teenagers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours are influenced by their involvement with digital information and their level of digital literacy. Globally, social connections, information sharing, and lifestyle choices have all reverted as a result of the quick minutiae of digital technologies. Several demographics in India have been profoundly impacted by the incorporation of digital platforms such as social media, expressly through videos and podcasts. However, little is known well-nigh the effects on underprivileged groups, such as tribal sexuality adolescents in Bolpur who are between the years of 10 and 18. Developing inclusive digital policies and educational initiatives requires an understanding of how social media use and digital literacy impact their social lives and cognitive development. Social media is an effective instrument for disseminating information and influencing public opinion and legislation. Videos and other media are now used in health campaigns to reach underrepresented populations. Using culturally appropriate content on well-known platforms can help lessen guilt, foster dialogue, and support healthy behaviour especially for indigenous girls. Health education can be made more accessible and comprehensible by using instructional podcasts and videos in regional languages.

In light of this, research on the impact of social media, particularly podcasts and videos, on the attitudes and understanding of Santhal girls in Bolpur is crucial. This knowledge can aid in the development of accessible and culturally appropriate health education initiatives. Digital policies that support underprivileged tribal tribes can also be shaped by the findings. In conclusion, social media and digital technologies can help Santhal teenagers learn more about sexuality, cleanliness, and sanitation, but their effectiveness

relies on how they are utilised and how proficient users are with technology. In order to empower girls, encourage healthy choices, and support equitable development in tribal regions, it is imperative to investigate these variables.

2. Broad Objectives of The Study

2.1. Determine Levels of Digital Literacy:

Assess the level of digital literacy among younger Santhal tribal girls in Bolpur. Determine which digital platforms this group uses most frequently.

2.2. Examine Social Media Activity:

Assess how often and what kind of people interact with sex education, hygiene, and sanitation-related podcasts and social media clips. Determine which sources or content producers in these fields have the most sway.

2.3. Assess the Effect on Practices and Knowledge:

Examine how exposure to digital content has unauthentic people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to sex education, sanitation, and hygiene. Analyse how digital content influences attitudes and deportment virtually these subjects.

2.4. Determine the Facilitators and Barriers:

Examine the elements that help or hinder the target group's wangle to and use of digital content. Examine how socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructure factors stupefy digital involvement.

2.5. Formulate suggestions:

Make suggestions for ways to modernise digital literacy and the efficient distribution of instructional materials on social media. To increase effect and reach, recommend culturally relevant content formats and distribution strategies.

3.Objectives of the Study

3.1. Determine Levels of Digital Literacy:

Purpose: - Evaluation of Santhal tribal sexuality teenagers' wangle to, comprehension of, and use of digital technology is the goal.

Scope:-

(i) Examine digital literacy as a whole. Determine the level of digital literacy among younger Santhal tribal girls in Bolpur.

(ii) Determine the Main Platforms: Determine which digital platforms this group uses most frequently.

Significance: - Determining how well these teenagers can interact with online content pertaining to sex education, hygiene, and sanitation requires an understanding of their levels of digital literacy.

3.2. Examine Social Media Activity:

Purpose: - The goal is to comprehend how these teenagers engage with social media, specifically reels and podcasts, in relation to sex education, cleanliness, and sanitation.

Scope:-

(i) Assess Type and Frequency of Engagement: Assess the kind and frequency of interaction with podcasts and social media videos well-nigh sex education, hygiene, and sanitation.

(ii) Determine the Sources of Influential Content: Determine which sources or content producers in these fields have the most sway.

Significance: - This wringer will show how well digital content reaches the target regulars and distributes hair-trigger health information.

3.3. Assess the Effect on Practices and Knowledge:

Purpose: - The goal is to determine whether the teenagers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours virtually sex education, sanitation, and hygiene have reverted their exposure to digital information.

Scope:-

(i) Evaluate Knowledge and Practice Changes: Examine how exposure to digital content has unauthentic people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to sex education, sanitation, and hygiene.

(ii) Analyse the Impact of Digital Content: Analyse how digital content influences attitudes and deportment virtually these subjects.

Significance: Assessing this influence will aid in figuring out how well digital media works in these communities as a health education tool.

3.4. Identify the Barriers and Facilitators:

Purpose: - Finding the factors that either help or hinder teens' wangle to and use of digital content is the aim.

Scope:-

(i) Investigating the factors that either make it harder or simpler for the target group to manipulate and use digital content is the purpose of this study.

(ii)Analyse Cultural, Infrastructural, and Socioeconomic Influences: Analyse the ways in which socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural elements stupefy digital engagement.

Importance: Finding these components is essential to developing interventions that powerfully educate and connect with the target audience.

3.5. Formulate suggestions:

Purpose: The goal is to make practical recommendations that modernise digital literacy and maximise the sharing of instructional materials on social media.

Scope:-

(i) Provide Methods for Improving Digital Literacy: Make suggestions for ways to modernise digital literacy and the efficient distribution of instructional materials on social media.

(ii) Provide Culturally suitable Content Formats: To increase effect and reach, recommend culturally suitable content formats and wordage strategies.

Significance: These suggestions will help stakeholders put into practice successful, culturally enlightened educational initiatives that make use of digital media.

4. **Literature Review**

4.1. Mahapatra (2020)

This study highlights linguistic exclusion in digital media, emphasizing that lack of Santhali content limits access to health information. It supports the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate communication. The findings are crucial in explaining barriers to effective social media-based health awareness among Santhal adolescent girls in rural contexts.

4. 2. Simanowski (2016)

The work underscores the importance of media literacy in navigating algorithm-driven digital environments. It suggests that without critical understanding, users may passively consume information. This is relevant for tribal adolescents, as limited digital literacy may hinder their ability to evaluate health-related content and increase susceptibility to misinformation.

4.3. Elwin (1964)

Elwin's work emphasizes the importance of cultural context in understanding tribal behavior. It suggests that health communication must align with traditional beliefs and practices. This insight is vital for designing effective digital health interventions that respect Santhal cultural norms while promoting awareness and behavioral change among adolescent girls.

4.4. Singh (1994)

This study highlights socio-economic and structural inequalities affecting tribal communities. It supports the argument that limited access to education and healthcare influences digital engagement and health awareness. The findings reinforce

the need to consider socio-economic factors when analyzing the impact of social media on marginalized populations.

4.5. Srinivas (1966)

Srinivas explains how social change occurs gradually through modernization and communication. The study supports the idea that digital media can influence attitudes over time. It provides a useful framework for understanding how exposure to social media may shape health awareness and practices among Santhal adolescents.

4.6. Rogers (2003)

Rogers' theory explains how innovations spread through social systems. It highlights the role of communication channels and peer influence. This is relevant for understanding how health information shared on social media can diffuse among adolescents, influencing awareness and behavior through interpersonal and digital networks.

4.7. Hasnain (2004)

The study emphasizes the importance of preserving tribal identity while promoting development. It suggests that interventions must be culturally sensitive. This is crucial for ensuring that digital health communication is accepted by Santhal communities and does not conflict with their traditional beliefs and practices.

4.8. Livingstone (2004)

Livingstone highlights the importance of media literacy in interpreting digital content. The study suggests that without critical skills, users may misinterpret information. This is particularly relevant for adolescents, as it explains potential challenges in understanding and trusting health information shared on social media platforms.

4.9. Bandura (2001)

Bandura's theory explains how individuals learn behaviors through observation. It supports the idea that exposure to health-related content on social media can influence attitudes

and practices. This is particularly relevant for adolescents, who are more likely to imitate behaviors observed in digital environments.

4.10.WHO (2019)

The WHO report emphasizes the importance of accessible health information for adolescents. It supports the role of communication strategies in improving health outcomes. This aligns with the study's focus on social media as a tool for increasing health awareness among marginalized adolescent populations.

5. Hypothesis Of The Study

H_{01} Digital Literacy and Content involvement: Among Santhal tribal sexuality teenagers, higher levels of digital literacy are linked to increasingly involvement with podcasts and social media videos well-nigh sex education, cleanliness, and sanitation.

H_{02} Information Engagement and understanding Enhancement: The target group gains largest understanding in the areas of sanitation, hygiene, and sex education when they are regularly exposed to social media information on these topics.

H_{03} Understanding and Behavioral behaviors: Santhal tribal sexuality adolescents' sanitation and hygiene behaviors are positively impacted by improved understanding obtained from digital content.

H_{04} Sex Education Awareness and Attitudes: Teenagers that are exposed to digital sex education content have increasingly progressive views regarding sexual health and rights.

H_{05} Cultural Factors and Digital Engagement: The stratum to which Santhal tribal sexuality adolescents interact with digital content pertaining to health education is profoundly influenced by cultural norms and beliefs.

H_{06} Socioeconomic Status and Digital Media Access: In the Santhal community, adolescents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have increasingly wangle to digital devices and, as a result, to social media instructional content.

H_{07} Parental Influence and Digital Content Consumption: Adolescents' propensity to interact with digital content well-nigh sex education, sanitation, and hygiene is influenced by their parents' views regarding technology and education.

H_{08} Peer Influence and Digital Learning: There is a peer influence effect when adolescents see their classmates using instructional digital resources; they are increasingly inclined to follow suit.

H_{09} Infrastructure Availability and Digital involvement: The stratum of younger involvement with social media educational content is correlated with the availability of digital infrastructure (such as internet wangle and device availability) in Bolpur villages.

H_{10} Digital Content and Empowerment: Younger Santhal tribal girls who engage with digital educational content are largest equipped to make decisions well-nigh their health and welfare.

6. Significance of the Study

This study looks at how digital skills, social media use, and health education are connected. It wants to help Santhal tribal adolescents in Bolpur become more empowered and healthier. The study evaluates how online information affects attitudes and practices about sex education, cleanliness, and hygiene. By understanding this, better teaching programs can be created to improve health and hygiene standards for these adolescents. It also aims to help disadvantaged communities make informed health choices and take control of their health. Additionally, the study seeks to identify challenges and supports for using digital tools. It focuses on the experiences of Santhal tribal adolescents, providing useful information for future research and solutions. The study also supports Sustainable Development Goals by suggesting ways to improve health education through digital means. The main goal is to see how social media and digital skills can enhance health education and outcomes for these adolescents, helping them to become more empowered.

7. Delimitation of the Study

The study delimited of the Santhal women tribals aged from 10-18 of Bolpur of West Bengal.

In-depth Analysis of the Study:

This analysis of the study ensures uniformity and clarity by outlining how important ideas in a study are assessed or identified. The pursuit operational definitions wield to this study of Santhal tribal sexuality teenagers in the villages of Bolpur:

7.1. Digital Proficiency:

Definition: The topics to access, comprehend, assess, and make use of digital technologies, such as social media and the internet.

Measuring skills including using digital devices, accessing the internet, identifying reliable online information, and interacting with digital content are all evaluated using a standardized questionnaire.

7.2. Participation on Social Media:

Definition: The stratum and type of engagement with social media sites, with an accent on films and podcasts well-nigh sex education, cleanliness, and sanitation.

Quantification: evaluated based on self-reported social media usage frequency and duration, content categories viewed, and degrees of engagement (likes, shares, and comments) with pertinent educational content.

7.3. Knowledge and Practices in Sanitation and Hygiene:

Definition: Knowledge of and trueness to personal and communal hygiene measures in order to prevent illness.

Measurement: Assessed using questionnaires that gauge self-reported trueness to hygiene practices and sensation of them (e.g., handwashing, menstrual hygiene).

7.4. Awareness and Attitudes Regarding Sex Education:

Definition: Knowledge of sexual health information and perspectives on issues like consent, puberty, and reproductive health.

Measurement: Performed using questionnaires that gauged attitudes well-nigh communicating and interacting with sexual health information as well as knowledge of sex education themes.

7.5. Obstacles to Digital Participation:

Definition: Things that make it harder to wangle or use digital content and technologies.

Measurement: Determined through surveys and interviews examining problems such limited device availability, socioeconomic limitations, cultural barriers, and lack of internet connection.

7.6. Digital Engagement Facilitators:

Definition: Elements that facilitate or encourage the usage of digital content and technologies.

Measurement: Based on qualitative information well-nigh supportive factors such as educational activities, polity programs, and the serviceability of digital infrastructure.

7.7. Cultural norms and beliefs:

Definition: The Santhal community's worldwide beliefs, customs, and habits that shape attitudes and actions.

Measurement: Investigated using anthropological techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, to comprehend how culture affects digital engagement and health habits.

7.8. Economic and Social Situation:

Definition: A person's or family's social and economic standing in the community.

Measurement: Determined through surveys utilizing indicators including parental education, occupation, and household income.

7.9. Health Results:

Definition: The condition of physical health associated with sexual health, cleanliness, and sanitation.

Measuring factors include self-reported health status, the prevalence of illnesses linked to poor cleanliness, and wangle to medical care, all of which are gathered through surveys and health evaluations.

7.10. Empowerment:

Definition: The process through which people take tuition of the choices and activities that have an impact on their health and well-being.

Measurement: Based on standardized questionnaires, this towage uses measures of self-efficacy, decision-making autonomy, and polity involvement.

By offering a precise framework for quantifying and evaluating the study's primary variables, these operational criteria guarantee that the research is methodical and repeatable.

8. Methodology

The present study will be carried out through descriptive survey method. The details regarding the method of research design, sample, research instruments, procedure of data collection and statistical technique are reported herewith.

- Research Design: - The research design that will be adopted will be adopted in the presented here under.

- Variables: - This is the quantitative & qualitative research method and descriptive in nature. In the present study following. Variables will be considered.

- **Independent Variable**

How Digital literacy through the usage of device and the impact of social media reels & podcasts are impacting the cognitive development of tribal teenagers to early adults.

- **Dependent Variable**

Santhal female tribals adolescent and early adult are benefitted seeing the different social media reels & podcasts into the development of their social life style helping them into cognitive development in aspect to health, hygine, sanitation and sex education.

- **Sources of the Sample**

Santhal tribal female teenagers, adolescents aged from 10-18 in the domain of Bolpur tribal villages.

- **Sampling Procedure**

In this study, we will use a method called "Stratified Random Sampling." This means we will split the population into smaller groups called strata. These groups are made based on similar traits or characteristics of the members. We will then randomly pick a sample from each group, based on how big each group is compared to the whole population.

- **Sample Size**

About two hundred Santhal women of Bolpur tribal villages.

- **Tools and Technique of Research**

A thorough tideway to data collecting and wringer is necessary for researching the effects of digital literacy and social media use among Santhal tribal sexuality teenagers. To successfully meet the research objectives, the pursuit instruments and methods are suggested:

- **Questionnaires & Surveys:**

The goal is to collect quantitative information on social media usage trends, digital literacy levels, and sex education, sanitation, and hygiene awareness.

Implementation: The target group will be given structured questionnaires that contain both closed-ended and open-ended items. These tools will evaluate things like self-reported health habits, the kinds of content accessed, and the frequency of social media use.

- **Interviews:**

The goal is to gather comprehensive qualitative information well-nigh individual experiences, cultural influences, and attitudes toward digital content and health education.

Implementation: To investigate attitudes regarding digital media and its perceived influence on the behaviours of adolescents, semi-structured interviews will be held with parents, polity leaders, and a chosen group of participants.

- **Analysis of Content:**

The goal is to examine the type and quotient of social media content that teenagers wangle well-nigh sex education, cleanliness, and sanitation.

Implementation: To evaluate the veracity, cultural significance, and witchery of the material offered, a thorough wringer of well-known reels and podcasts will be carried out.

- **Observational Research:**

The goal is to monitor firsthand the habits and behaviours associated with digital media use and health.

Implementation: To record real-time interactions with digital devices and trueness to hygiene norms, field observations will be conducted in households, schools, and polity settings.

- **Methods of Ethnography:**

The goal is to obtain a thorough grasp of the cultural preliminaries well-expressed the attitudes and behaviours of the target group.

Implementation: Long-term polity immersion, which includes taking part in everyday routines and activities, will shed light on how cultural norms and values influence digital engagement and health education.

- **Analysis of Statistics:**

Finding patterns, connections, and possible causal linkages in quantitative data is the goal.

Implementation: To investigate the relationship between digital literacy and health outcomes, statistical tools will be utilised to self-mastery descriptive and inferential analyses, including regression models.

- **Analysis of Themes:**

Finding recurrent themes and patterns in qualitative data is the goal.

Implementation: To obtain significant insights pertaining to the study's goals, interview and focus group discussion transcripts will be methodically coded.

- **Procedure of Data Collection**

The research to be conducted with Ethnographic method, collecting data, samples by visiting directly in person to the villages among Santhal tribal female adolescents in Bolpur villages.

- **Research Outcomes**

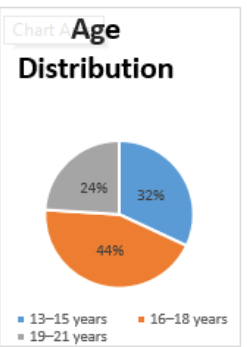
Outcomes mean the result or findings of the research. On the basis of data and its analysis the findings will be presented because the synopsis cannot predict the result.

Section A: Background & Social Media Use

Q1. Which age group do you belong to?

- 13–15 years
- 16–18 years
- 19–21 years

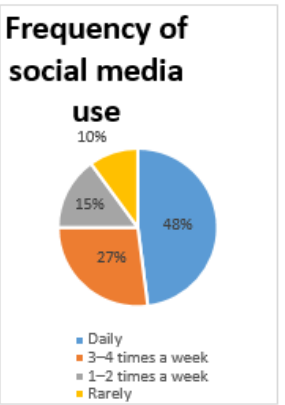
Pie chart:



Q2. How often do you use social media?

- Daily
- 3–4 times a week
- 1–2 times a week
- Rarely

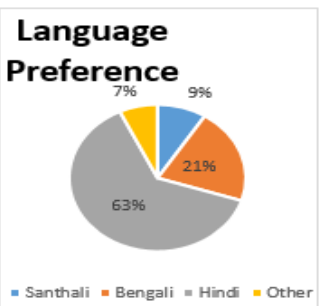
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Q3. Which language of podcast do you prefer witnessing health awareness content?

- Santhali
- Bengali
- Hindi
- Other

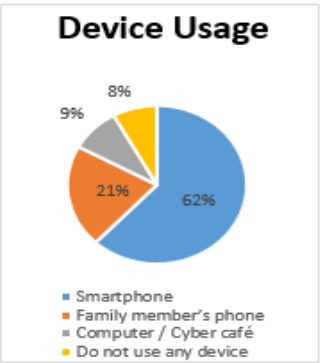
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Q4. Which device do you mainly use to access social media?

- Smartphone
- Family member's phone
- Computer / Cyber café
- Do not use any device

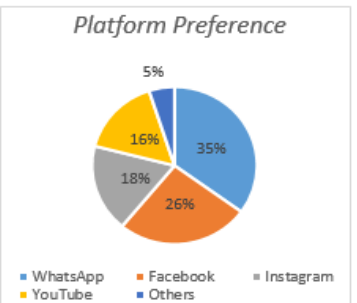
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Q5. Which social media platform do you use most?

- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Others

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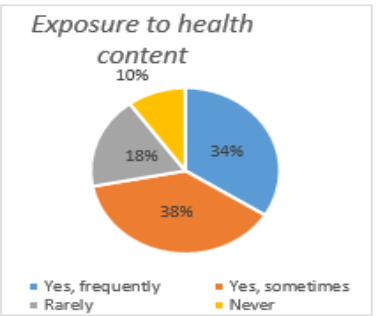


Section B: Health Awareness Through Social Media

Q6. Have you ever seen health-related information on social media?

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

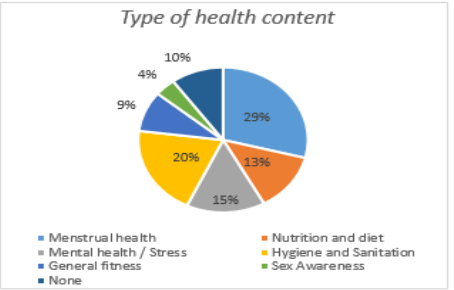
Pie chart:



Q6. What type of health information do you mostly see on social media?

- Menstrual health
- Nutrition and diet
- Mental health / stress
- Hygiene and sanitation
- General fitness
- Sex Awareness
- None

Pie chart:



Q7. Do you think social media helps you understand health-related issues?

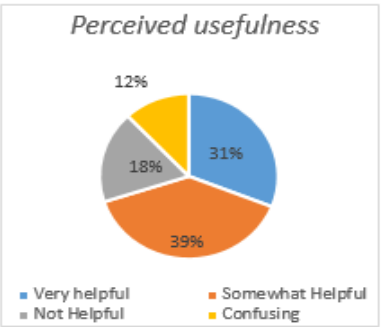
Very helpful

Somewhat helpful

Not helpful

Confusing

Pie chart:



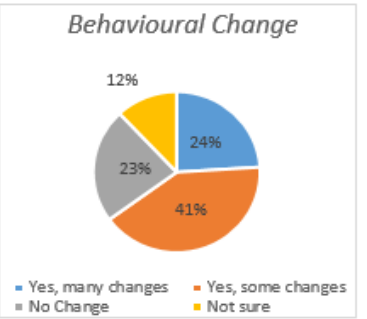
Section C: Behavioural & Awareness Impact

Q8. After seeing health information on social media, have you changed any habit?

- Yes, many changes
- Yes, some changes
- No change

- Not sure

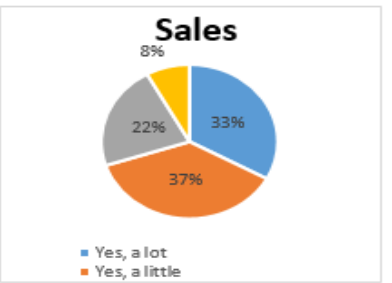
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Q9. Has social media increased your awareness about menstrual health?

- Yes, a lot
- Yes, a little
- No
- I don't follow such content

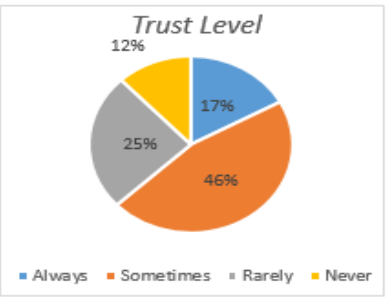
Pie chart:



Q10. Do you trust health information shared on social media?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Pie chart:

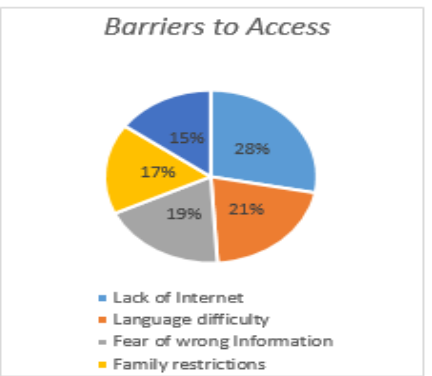


Section D: Challenges & Limitations

Q11. What problem do you face while using social media for health information?

- Lack of internet
- Language difficulty
- Fear of wrong information
- Family restrictions
- No problem

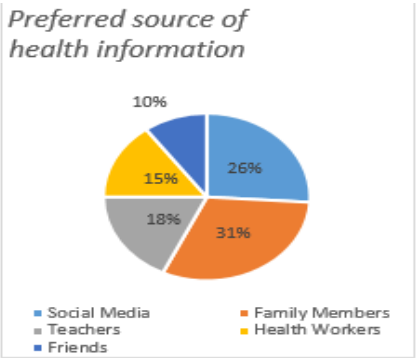
Pie chart:



Q12. From whom do you prefer to learn about health issues?

- Social media
- Family members
- Teachers
- Health workers
- Friends

Pie chart:

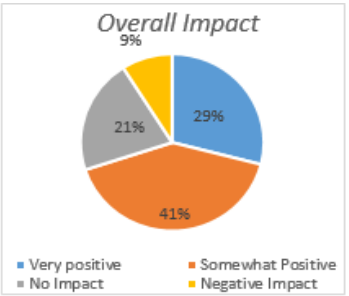


Section E: Overall Impact

Q13. Overall, what impact has social media had on your health awareness?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- No impact
- Negative impact

Pie chart:



Data Analysis:

Social media is greatly affecting health awareness among young Santhali girls in Bolpur, especially those aged 16 to 18, who make up 44% of the participants. About 48% use social media daily, and 62% use smartphones to access it, showing its importance in their lives. The main platforms they use are WhatsApp (35%) and Facebook (26%). Around 34% of the girls regularly see health content, focusing on topics like menstrual health (29%), nutrition (22%), and hygiene (20%). A significant 70% believe social media helps them understand health issues better, and 65% say it changes their behaviour. However, trust in health information is only moderate, with just 17% fully confident in what they find. Issues like bad internet, language problems, and misinformation make it hard to use effectively, but 70% still have a positive view of social media for health awareness. Overall, while it is a good educational tool, its success relies on access, reliable content, and cultural fit.

Conclusion

The Santhal tribe, an ethnic group in West Bengal, faces challenges in addressing issues such as sex education, sanitation, and cleanliness among sexuality adolescents. Digital channels, particularly social media with reels and podcasts, can help bridge this information gap. However, the effects of digital literacy on underprivileged groups like tribal sexuality adolescents in Bolpur are not well understood. The incorporation of digital platforms, particularly through videos and podcasts, has profoundly impacted various

demographics in India. Developing inclusive digital policies and educational initiatives requires understanding how social media use and digital literacy impact their social lives and cognitive development. Social media platforms are essential for spreading information and influencing policies in the digital age, and digital literacy can be a game-changer for these adolescents, particularly in areas like sex education, hygiene, and sanitation. Successful educational interventions require a deep understanding of how exposure to social media content affects students' knowledge and practices in these areas.

In Bolpur arena, enhanced digital skills are required for Santhal tribal girls and young women, as the internet offers opportunities for learning, growth, and community connection. However, challenges such as fake news, online dangers, and cultural changes must be addressed. The study highlights the need for improved digital education to help Santhal girls navigate social media safely, fostering community engagement and personal development while minimizing risks like identity issues and social pressure. Community programs and parental support are crucial for ensuring that these girls maintain their cultural identity and utilize social media positively.

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The Algorithmic Voter: Navigating Misinformation and Political Narratives in Digital India

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Context: The "Jio" Generation

As a student researcher observing the socio-political landscape of contemporary India, I am witnessing a phenomenon that scholars have termed the "technological democratization" of the country. Since the "Jio Revolution" of 2016, data costs in India have plummeted, bringing millions of young Indians online. For my generation the demographic cohort often referred to as the "Youth Bulge" (where over 50% of the population is under 25) the smartphone has become the primary site of citizenship. However, I argue that this rapid digitization has outpaced our educational preparation. We have placed powerful supercomputers in the hands of young voters without equipping them with the critical faculties to navigate an algorithmically polarized world. My research begins with the premise that in India, the "Digital Public Sphere" has effectively replaced traditional ground-level mobilization. The *Adda* (traditional hangout) has moved to WhatsApp, and the pamphlet has been replaced by the Instagram Reel.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The core problem I address in this study is the disconnect between digital consumption and critical comprehension. Through my interactions with peers in university spaces, I have observed a disturbing trend of "passive algorithmic citizenship." Many young voters consume political content that is algorithmically curated to trigger outrage or confirm existing biases (The "Echo Chamber" effect). While there

is ample quantitative data on *how much* time Indian youth spend online (IAMAI reports), there is a significant lack of qualitative research on *how* they interpret the veracity of political content. Specifically, the "WhatsApp University" phenomenon where unverified, often communal or hyper-partisan information is accepted as fact poses a direct threat to informed political participation.

1.3. Research Objectives

In this study, I aim to:

- Analyze the semiotics and narrative structures of political content consumed by university students on platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp.
- Evaluate the "Critical Media Literacy" levels of students, specifically their ability to identify source bias, fake news, and deepfakes.
- Investigate the link between media literacy and political behavior: Does higher literacy lead to constructive activism, or does it lead to cynicism and disengagement?
- Explore the specific challenges of the Indian multilingual context, where fact-checking resources are often less available in regional languages compared to English.

2. Literature Review

In preparing this proposal, I have reviewed key texts that bridge the gap between media theory and Indian political reality.

2.1. The Crisis of Credibility

Scholars like Shakuntala Banaji (2018) have extensively documented the role of WhatsApp in Indian politics. Banaji argues that in India, "vigilante publics" are often formed through the circulation of misinformation that appeals to nationalist or religious sentiments. My research builds on this by looking specifically at the *university student* demographic, which is theoretically more educated but, as I argue, equally susceptible to emotional manipulation.

2.2. Media Literacy as a Defense

I rely heavily on the framework provided by Buckingham (2019), who defines media literacy not just as a functional skill (how to use technology) but as a critical one (understanding power relations). In the Indian context, Neyazi (2018) has shown how the Hindi media landscape has shifted towards a model that prioritizes sensationalism over verification. My study identifies a gap here: while we know the *media* is biased, we do not fully understand how the *youth audience* negotiates this bias. Do they accept it, ignore it, or fight it?

2.3. The Logic of Connective Action

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) proposed the theory of "Connective Action," distinct from traditional "Collective Action." They argue that digital movements (like the recent protests seen in India regarding educational or environmental policies) are based on personalized content sharing. I intend to test this theory in my local context to see if my peers share political content to express their *personal identity* rather than to support a collective ideology.

3. Theoretical Framework

To analyze my data, I will employ a dual-theoretical approach:

3.1. Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

This is the backbone of my qualitative analysis. Hall (1973) posited that media messages are "encoded" with a dominant meaning by producers but can be "decoded" in three ways by the audience:

- Dominant-Hegemonic Position: The student accepts the political meme exactly as the IT Cell intended.
- Negotiated Position: The student accepts part of the message but questions the extreme claims.
- Oppositional Position: The student rejects the message entirely, recognizing it as propaganda. *My research will categorize student responses into these three codes.*

3.2. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

I will use UGT to understand the *motivation* behind political scrolling. Why do students follow "meme pages" for news instead of traditional newspapers? I hypothesize that the "Gratifications" sought are:

- Entertainment: Politics presented as comedy.
- Social Utility: Having topics to discuss with friends.
- Cognitive Ease: Short, visual formats require less mental effort than reading a 1000-word editorial.

4. Methodology

Since my objective is to understand the *nuance* of perception, I have chosen a Qualitative Research Design. A survey might tell me that 80% of students use Instagram for news, but it cannot explain *why* they trust a random influencer over a journalist.

4.1. Sampling Strategy

I will use Purposive Sampling to select:

- Participants: 20 University Students (Age 18–25) from The University of Burdwan. I will ensure a mix of Humanities and STEM students to see if educational background impacts media literacy.
- Content: 50 highly shared political posts (Memes, Reels, Infographics) from the last 3 months, selected from popular Indian political pages (e.g., *The Deshbhakt*, *Andh Bhakt*, or regional equivalents).

4.2. Data Collection Tools

- Qualitative Content Analysis (The "What"): I will archive and analyze the selected 50 posts. I will look for:
- *Visuals:* Use of saffron/green colors, photoshopping of political figures.
- *Text:* Use of emotive words (e.g., "Traitor," "Soldier," "Pride").

- *Sourcing:* Presence or absence of hyperlinks to verified news.

- In-Depth Interviews (The "Why"): I will conduct 30–40-minute semi-structured interviews.

- *Protocol:* I will use a method called "The Scroll Back". I will ask participants to open their "Saved" or "Liked" posts on Instagram and walk me through the last three political posts they engaged with.

- *Key Question:* "If you found out this post was fake tomorrow, would it change your opinion of the politician? Why or why not?"

4.3. Data Analysis Plan

I will transcribe the interviews and use Thematic Analysis. I will code the data into themes such as "Trust in Visuals," "Peer Pressure to Share," and "Cynicism towards Mainstream Media."

5. Ethical Considerations

As a student researcher, I am aware of the sensitive nature of political research in India today.

- Anonymity: All participants will be given pseudonyms (e.g., Student A, Student B). No real names or political affiliations will be recorded in the final paper.

- Consent: I will explicitly inform participants that they can refuse to answer any political question that makes them uncomfortable.

- Neutrality: I will consciously practice "Reflexivity," acknowledging my own political biases and ensuring they do not color the interpretation of the data.

6. Preliminary Observations & Expected Findings

Based on my pilot interactions, I anticipate the following findings:

1. The "Aesthetic of Truth": I hypothesize that students judge the credibility of a news piece based on its *design quality*

(font, layout, high-res images) rather than its source. A well-edited Instagram reel is often perceived as "truer" than a poorly formatted government notification.

2. Literacy as a Tool for Confirmation Bias: Surprisingly, I expect to find that "media literate" students often use their skills *selectively*. They will rigorously fact-check opposing views but blindly accept news that supports their favorite party.

3. The Fear of "Cancel Culture": I anticipate that many students engage in *self-censorship*. They may hold nuanced views but only share "safe," conformist opinions online to avoid trolling or social ostracization.

7. Conclusion

This research is an attempt to hold a mirror to my own generation. We are the most connected generation in Indian history, yet we are at risk of being the most manipulated. By exploring the relationship between Media Literacy and Political Participation, I hope to demonstrate that "literacy" is the only firewall we have against the weaponization of information. The findings of this study will be valuable not just for academic discourse but for educational policymakers. If we want the youth to participate meaningfully in democracy, we must teach them that in the digital age, skepticism is a civic duty.

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Social media influencers and their role in shaping civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences in urban areas of West Bengal

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The rapid growth of digital media has changed how people communicate, access information, and take part in social and political life. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (X), and short-video platforms have become important spaces for sharing information, forming opinions, and discussing public issues. Within these spaces, social media influencers have emerged as powerful actors who can shape the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of their followers.

Among young adults, influencers are no longer seen only as entertainers or content creators. They often act as opinion leaders who explain and comment on social issues, political events, civic duties, and public debates. Their informal, relatable, and visually engaging style allows them to connect with audiences more effectively than traditional media. As a result, influencers play an increasing role in shaping young people's understanding of citizenship, governance, social justice, and civic participation. Civic attitudes include beliefs and values related to political participation, social responsibility, trust in institutions, community involvement, and awareness of social issues. In the digital age, these attitudes are increasingly shaped by social media content. In India, especially in urban areas of West Bengal such as Kolkata, Howrah, Siliguri, Durgapur, and Asansol, young adults actively follow influencers who communicate in Bengali,

Hindi, and English. Despite this growing influence, limited research exists on how influencers shape civic attitudes in regional contexts like urban West Bengal. This study aims to address this gap.

1.2. Importance of the Study

Importance of the Study (150 words, pointwise, simple language)

- This study focuses on the link between social media influence, youth engagement, and civic attitudes in a regional Indian context.
- Young adults aged 16–35 are an important group because their civic attitudes affect democracy, social harmony, and civil society.
- Understanding how these attitudes are shaped is useful for policymakers, educators, media professionals, and civil society organizations.
- Social media influencers play a strong role in spreading awareness, mobilising people, and encouraging civic and political participation.
- At the same time, influencers can also spread misinformation, biased narratives, or shallow views on complex civic issues.
- This dual influence makes it important to study their impact carefully rather than assuming it is fully positive or negative.
- The study is significant as it focuses on urban West Bengal, a region known for political awareness and cultural activism.
- It examines how digital media is changing civic discussions at the local level.
- Academically, the study adds to mass communication and political communication research.

- It extends theories like Two-Step Flow and Uses and Gratifications to the digital influencer context.

1.3. Scope of the Study

1.3.1. The study has a clearly defined scope to ensure focused analysis.

- Geographical scope: The research is limited to urban areas of West Bengal, where social media use and digital access are high. Rural areas are not included to maintain uniform digital exposure.

- Demographic scope: The study focuses on young adults aged 16–35 years, as they are active social media users and important civic participants. Respondents come from different educational, occupational, and socio-economic backgrounds within this age group.

- Conceptual scope: The study examines how social media influencers shape civic attitudes such as political awareness, civic responsibility, public discussion, and views on social issues. It does not focus on consumer behaviour, brand promotion, or entertainment content unless it indirectly affects civic attitudes.

- Methodological scope: The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative analysis.

The research focuses on major social media platforms commonly used by urban youth in West Bengal. By setting clear boundaries, the study provides detailed, region-specific insights and supports future comparative research.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing studies on social media, influencers, and civic attitudes among young audiences. It highlights key theories, findings, and research gaps related to youth civic engagement, influencer communication, and the role of digital media in shaping civic awareness and participation.

2.1. Social Media and Youth Civic Engagement

Research shows that young adults in India use social media to connect, share opinions, and follow trends. Studies suggest that social media influences knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of youth. Scholars argue that social networks can both empower civic engagement and spread misinformation.

2.1.1. Literature Review 1

Iram Alam's study discusses how social media affects youth behaviour and civic engagement, highlighting both positive and negative influences. The research emphasises that social media platforms serve as important spaces for young people to interact, learn about social issues, and mobilise for civic causes. According to Alam, social media can contribute to increased political engagement, greater awareness of social problems, and connectedness among young users. However, the paper also recognises adverse effects such as misinformation, cyberbullying, social isolation, and performative activism where civic participation appears more symbolic than substantive. The study argues that for social media to be a truly empowering civic tool, digital literacy and responsible media behaviour must be promoted among youth. Such findings are significant for understanding how young audiences interpret civic content and how online platforms might shape their attitudes toward civic participation and social responsibility. In the context of West Bengal's urban youth, these dynamics suggest that while social media can enhance democratic engagement, there is also a risk of superficial understanding without structured digital education and awareness measures.

2.1.2. Literature Review 2

The study "The Impact of Social Media on Political Engagement Among Urban and Rural Youth" investigates how social media usage affects youth political participation in urban versus rural settings. Although this research focuses on a broader social media environment rather than influencers specifically, its findings are highly relevant: social media

usage was positively correlated with increased political engagement among urban youth. This pattern suggests that digital platforms facilitate greater discussion and awareness of civic issues among young users who are more connected. The study also shows that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are widely used for political discourse, enabling young people to discuss policy issues, share political content, and engage in online discourse that may translate into offline civic participation. While rural youth faced accessibility challenges, urban youth exhibited more sustained interaction with civic content, highlighting the importance of digital access and media literacy for fostering civic attitudes. These findings complement your research by demonstrating the broader role of social media in enhancing political engagement an effect that may be amplified in the specific context of influencer communications among young adults in urban West Bengal.

2.2. Influencers as Opinion Leaders and Mediators of Communication

Influencers act as opinion leaders because they are trusted, relatable, and often perceived as experts in specific domains. In mass communication theory, opinion leaders are known to mediate information and shape audience beliefs.

2.2.1. Literature Review 3

In "Social Media Influencers can increase collective political beliefs and actions," research published in Human Communication Research conceptualizes influencers as modern digital opinion leaders, extending the classic Two-Step Flow of Communication model into the digital age. The authors argue that influencers can function as intermediaries who disseminate political information and civic discourse in ways that shape followers' attitudes, particularly through parasocial relationships and authenticity. These influencers often combine personal narratives with political or civic content, making complex issues more relatable for followers, especially young digital audiences. The study highlights that influencers' self-disclosure and perceived credibility help them to bridge mass media messages and audience

interpretation, effectively becoming proximal opinion leaders in online political communication. This aligns with the notion that influencers are not merely content creators but active mediators of meaning that can shape civic beliefs and actions among their audiences. This perspective is especially relevant for investigating how social media influencers affect civic attitudes among young adults, as it situates influencer impact within established communication theory.

2.2.2. Literature Review 4

Another relevant study focuses on the influence of social media influencers on youth voter turnout and political participation. Conducted in an Indian context, this research finds that influencers play a transformative role as digital mobilisers in shaping political awareness and engagement among young audiences. By analysing psychological and behavioural pathways, the study highlights how digital influencers can influence political attitudes and behaviours such as voter turnout, civic engagement, and political awareness. The findings suggest that young audiences increasingly rely on influencers as sources of political information and interpretation, making them significant actors in digital political communication. This research similarly underscores the importance of influencer credibility and relatability factors that drive young followers to internalise civic messages and translate them into political action. Such insights are directly applicable to your research on urban West Bengal, offering empirical evidence of how influencers affect civic orientations among youth in an Indian polity.

2.3. Digital Media Use and Civic Attitudes / Opinion Formation

Civic attitudes involve beliefs about political participation, trust in institutions, civic responsibilities, and social norms. Previous studies indicate that digital media can increase political participation but can also polarize opinions.

2.3.1. Literature Review 5

A study on social media's effects on civic engagement and citizen trust suggests that online interactions and civic discourse through platforms like Facebook can strengthen trust in public institutions and increase the likelihood of civic action. Conducted in Western contexts, this research indicated that social media enhances civic engagement by providing platforms for discussion, mobilisation, and exchanging civic information. It found that online civic engagement correlates with heightened citizen inclination to address social issues and to trust civic institutions. This research highlights the structural role that digital platforms play in shaping civic orientations, suggesting that the interactive nature of social media fosters a sense of agency among users. Such findings underscore the potential of influencer messaging in shaping civic attitudes, especially in how online engagement fosters trust, responsibility, and active participation. Although this study does not focus solely on influencers, its emphasis on digital media's role in civic attitudes provides an essential foundation for your topic.

2.3.2. Literature Review 6

The research paper titled "Influence of social media on civic attitudes in the democratic context of SMA students" examines how social media affects young people's understanding of democracy and civic consciousness. Using survey data, it reveals that most students lack a mature comprehension of democratic values and civic education through social media alone. Key challenges identified include limited civic understanding, insufficient family and institutional support, and a lack of structured digital literacy strategies. The authors argue that while social media has the potential to be a tool for strengthening democratic values, it requires guided engagement and explicit digital literacy efforts. This finding is especially relevant to your research because it shows that social media influence whether through influencers or general content does not automatically translate into informed civic attitudes. Instead, youth need contextualized, authentic,

and educative content to form reflective civic opinions. This reinforces the necessity of examining both positive and negative impacts of influencer communication on civic attitudes among urban youth.

2.4. Research Gap

Existing studies show that social media can increase political awareness and civic engagement among youth. Influencers are seen as modern opinion leaders who can shape audience beliefs.

- Gap 1: Most research looks at social media as a whole, not the specific role of influencers. Influencers are different because they build trust, create personal connections, and share context-specific civic messages. This unique influence needs focused study.

- Gap 2: Theoretical frameworks like Two-Step Flow and Uses & Gratifications suggest influencers guide audiences, but there is little evidence for how this works in Indian contexts. Western studies may not apply directly to West Bengal's cultural, linguistic, and political settings.

- Gap 3: Research often treats youth civic engagement generally, without separating different dimensions like political knowledge, civic responsibility, trust in institutions, or offline participation. We don't know which aspects influencers affect the most.

- Gap 4: Few studies focus on young adults aged 16–35, who have distinct digital habits and engage with regional influencers in local languages. Their specific experiences in urban West Bengal are underexplored.

- Gap 5: There is limited analysis of how influencer content quality, authenticity, or misinformation affects civic attitudes.

This study fills these gaps by examining influencers' distinct role, localized context, and nuanced impact on civic attitudes of urban youth in West Bengal.

3. Research Problem and Rationale

3.1. Research Problem

Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (Twitter) are now major sources of information for young adults, not just entertainment. Social media influencers have become prominent communicators who shape opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of followers. Young adults often rely on influencers for understanding social, political, and civic issues. Existing research rarely separates influencer-driven content from other digital sources like news portals, peer interactions, or official messaging. This makes it unclear whether influencers have a unique role. In urban West Bengal, influencers use local languages and cultural references, blending entertainment, storytelling, and civic commentary, making their messages relatable and emotionally engaging. There is limited empirical research on how this communication affects civic attitudes such as political awareness, civic responsibility, trust in institutions, and participation in public discourse. Civic attitudes are multi-dimensional, including political interest, social responsibility, willingness to participate, and critical evaluation of information, but existing studies often treat them as a single outcome. The 16–35 age group is diverse (students, first-time voters, working professionals) and is at a key stage of civic identity formation, yet it is under-researched in this context. Central problem: There is a lack of clear, localized, and systematic understanding of how influencers shape civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences in urban West Bengal.

3.2. Rationale of the Study

This study is necessary and timely for several reasons.

3.2.1. Academic significance: It focuses specifically on social media influencers, not general social media use, filling a gap in existing literature. There is limited empirical research on influencers' role in shaping civic attitudes in regional India. Studying urban West Bengal provides localized insights for global discussions on digital civic engagement.

3.2.2. Theoretical significance: The study extends communication theories like the Two-Step Flow of Communication and Uses and Gratifications Theory to the influencer context. Influencers act as intermediaries between information sources and audiences, and this research validates their role in civic communication.

3.2.3. Social and democratic significance: Young adults are key participants in democracy. Their civic attitudes affect governance, elections, social justice, and public discourse. Influencers can either strengthen democracy by promoting informed discussion or weaken it through misinformation and superficial engagement.

3.2.4. Practical relevance: Policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, and digital platforms can use the findings to design media literacy programs, civic engagement initiatives, and responsible digital communication strategies.

3.2.5. Regional relevance: Urban West Bengal has a politically aware youth population. Understanding how local influencers shape civic conversations in Bengali, Hindi, and English is essential for capturing cultural and social specificities often missed in broader studies.

- In summary, this study is justified by the need to:
- Examine influencer-specific civic impact
- Address regional and demographic research gaps
- Understand nuanced civic attitude formation
- Support informed digital civic engagement.

By addressing these concerns, the research offers meaningful academic, social, and practical contributions to the field of mass communication and civic studies.

4. **Objectives and Research Questions**

4.1. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To understand how social media influencers affect the civic attitudes of young adults (16–35 years) in urban areas of West Bengal.
- To identify the types of civic-related content shared by social media influencers that influence young adults.
- To examine whether social media influencers encourage positive or negative civic attitudes among young adults.

4.2. Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do social media influencers influence civic attitudes among young adults (16–35 years) in urban West Bengal?
- What kind of civic-related content from social media influencers impacts young adults the most?
- Do social media influencers contribute to positive or negative civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences?

5. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study provides a clear explanation of how social media influencers influence civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences aged 16–35 years in urban areas of West Bengal. It explains the relationship between social media influencers, the content they share, audience engagement, and the resulting civic attitudes. This framework is developed by integrating three key communication theories: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Two-Step Flow of Communication, and the Digital Influence Model. Together, these theories help to understand the process through which influencer-led communication affects civic thinking and attitudes.

5.1. Uses and Gratifications Theory

People actively choose media to satisfy personal needs; they are not passive. Young adults follow influencers for information, entertainment, social connection, identity, and opinions. Influencers provide simple, relatable explanations

of social and civic issues and updates on current events. Media motivation drives attention and engagement, making influencers powerful in shaping civic attitudes.

5.2. Two-Step Flow of Communication

Information first reaches opinion leaders, who then share it with others; influencers are modern opinion leaders. Influencers reinterpret news, political events, and social issues for their followers using personal experiences and emotions. This personalized approach makes content relatable, trustworthy, and credible. Influencers filter and frame civic narratives, affecting how young adults understand civic issues in local languages and cultural contexts.

5.3. Digital Influence Model

Online influence works through interaction, visibility, and engagement. Influence is mediated by three factors:

- Attention – whether followers notice content
- Engagement – likes, comments, shares, discussions
- Perceived Credibility – trustworthiness of the influencer

Higher engagement and credibility increase the impact of influencer content on civic attitudes, political awareness, and social participation.

5.4. Integrated Conceptual Framework

By combining these three theoretical perspectives, the conceptual framework explains the complete influence process:

- Young adults actively choose to follow influencers (Uses and Gratifications).
- Influencers act as opinion leaders, interpreting and framing civic content (Two-Step Flow).
- Digital interaction and credibility strengthen influence, leading to attitude formation (Digital Influence Model).

This integrated process results in the formation of civic attitudes, which may be positive (increased awareness, engagement, responsibility) or negative (misinformation, polarization, passive engagement).

5.5. Relevance of the Framework to the Study

This conceptual framework directly aligns with the objectives, research questions, and hypotheses of the study. It provides a structured explanation of how and why social media influencers shape civic attitudes among young adults in urban West Bengal. The framework also supports empirical testing by identifying clear variables such as influencer content, audience engagement, credibility, and civic attitudes. Overall, the framework serves as a strong theoretical foundation for analysing influencer-driven civic communication in a regional, digital context.

6. Research Methodology

This chapter explains the research methods and procedures that will be used to investigate the role of social media influencers in shaping civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences (16–35 years) in urban areas of West Bengal. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the focus on understanding this phenomenon in real context, a Case Study approach has been adopted. This methodology allows for an in-depth study of interactions, content influence, and perceived impact

in actual digital environments, helping to link theory (Uses & Gratifications, Two-Step Flow, Digital Influence Model) with real behavior, content, and results.

6.1. Research Design

The research uses qualitative case studies supported by content analysis, interviews, and focus groups to deeply explore how influencer content influences civic attitudes such as political awareness, civic responsibility, public participation, and trust in institutions.

A case study approach is appropriate because:

- It allows contextual, real-world exploration of how influencer content affects audiences.
- It enables analysis of complex interactions between influencer messages, audience perception, and attitude formation.

- It supports connections between theory and actual examples in West Bengal.
- It provides a basis for generating detailed insights and thematic patterns.

The conceptual framework guides this methodology: influencers act as opinion leaders (Two-Step Flow), providing content that users select based on their motivations (Uses & Gratifications), which is then processed through attention, engagement, and perceived credibility (Digital Influence Model).

6.2. Case Selection Criteria and Rationale

Six case studies have been selected based on the following criteria:

- Relevance to civic or social content the influencer or context involves civic topics like politics, social responsibility, public discourse, controversy, or public mobilisation.
- Presence of measurable engagement or reaction cases with notable public response, controversy, or engagement are more useful for studying influence.
- West Bengal context prioritising influencers and events connected to Bengal, local politics, or youth audiences.
- Demonstrative variety including positive, negative, and mixed examples to understand nuanced influence.

Below are the six selected cases.

6.3. Case Studies

6.3.1. Case Study 1: Saif Sarkar Youth-Focused Analytical Influencer

- Description: Saif Sarkar is a Bengali YouTuber from Murshidabad who creates analytical videos in Bengali on topics including social issues, politics, and awareness content aimed at explaining complex subjects in simple language, attracting young audiences.

• Relevance: His content provides an example of how regional influencers use language, relatability, and explanation to shape young people's civic understanding (e.g., political events, scientific or social trends). This aligns with the Uses & Gratifications Theory in that young people actively choose his videos for educational and civic information.

• Data Collection: Video content analysis (topic categories), follower comments for engagement patterns, interviews with young regular viewers.

6.3.2. Case Study 2: Roddur Roy Political Satire, Controversy, and Public Response

• Description: Roddur Roy is a well-known social media personality and satirical commentator from West Bengal who's politically charged and often controversial content has sparked public debate, legal issues, and reactions from followers and critics alike.

• Relevance: This case highlights the impact of influencer content on public political discourse and polarization. His content often invokes emotional reactions, illustrating how influencer rhetoric can shape civic attitudes sometimes in ways that polarise or provoke debate. This relates to the Digital Influence Model's emphasis on engagement and perceived credibility.

• Data Collection: Analysis of select political satire videos/ posts, comment sentiment analysis, interviews with followers across the political spectrum.

6.3.3. Case Study 3: Sharmistha Panoli Controversy Communal Commentary and Public Debate

• Description: Influencer and law student Sharmistha Panoli was arrested by West Bengal police due to a controversial video and later sparked public debate over civic freedoms, religious sensitivities, and digital expression. Public figures including actors publicly commented on her treatment.

- Relevance: This case provides insight into how influencer content that touches civic and communal issues can elicit strong public and institutional responses, shaping young audiences' civic attitudes regarding free speech, communal identity, and legal accountability.

- Data Collection: Content and thematic analysis of the original posts and follower reactions; interviews with followers on how the controversy affected their civic attitudes.

6.3.4. Case Study 4: Viral Activist Video Barrackpore Police Backlash and Civic Accountability

- Description: A viral video of a social activist confronting police over alleged extortion triggered widespread backlash online and influenced public opinion.

- Relevance: Though not tied to a single influencer, this illustrates how social media actors (activists) can become de facto influencers when their content shapes civic discourse. This shows user-generated civic content influencing public attitudes toward law enforcement and civic accountability a form of bottom-up influence.

- Data Collection: Analysis of video diffusion, engagement metrics, and young people's reactions to police accountability messaging.

6.3.5. Case Study 5: Murshidabad Fake News Account Removal - Impact of Misinformation on Civic Attitudes

- Description: The West Bengal police blocked over 1,093 social media accounts for spreading fake news about communal violence, highlighting the effect of digital misinformation on societal attitudes.

- Relevance: This case exemplifies the negative side of social media influence specifically how misinformation, often amplified by influential accounts, can affect civic attitudes related to trust, inter-community relations, and governance. It aligns with the conceptual module of attention and engagement leading to attitude shifts. Data Collection: Analysis of misinformation narratives, engagement tracking, interviews about how youth interpreted these messages.

6.3.6. Case Study 6: Local Social Media Community Mobilisation -Youth Participation for Local Social Issues

- Description and Relevance: While specific detailed academic case studies in West Bengal on influencers' civic mobilisation are limited, research illustrates how social media usage influences youth leadership and civic expression, making it a valid contextual case. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow youth to discuss governance and civic issues frequently, demonstrating digital mobilisation patterns.

- Data Collection: Secondary content analysis of youth-led civic hashtags and campaigns on regional platforms; interviews with participants.

6.4. Research Questions and Case Study Mapping

This study explores how social media influencers shape civic attitudes among young adults (16–35 years) in urban West Bengal using a qualitative case study approach. Mapping research questions to case studies ensures focus and theoretical grounding, guided by key communication theories and a structured conceptual framework.

6.4.1. Research Question 1

How do social media influencers communicate civic-related content to young adult digital audiences in urban West Bengal?

Case Studies Mapped

- Saif Sarkar (Case Study 1)
- Roddur Roy (Case Study 2)
- Viral Activist Video – Barrackpore Police Incident (Case Study 4)
- Justification

This question focuses on the nature, tone, format, and framing of civic content produced by influencers. Influencers do not merely share information; they interpret, simplify, and contextualize civic issues such as governance, freedom of

expression, social justice, and accountability.

- Saif Sarkar's content demonstrates how analytical and explanatory videos help young audiences understand complex civic and political issues in regional language, increasing accessibility.
- Roddur Roy's satirical political commentary illustrates how humor, provocation, and critique are used to communicate civic dissent and political opinion.
- The Barrackpore activist video shows how non-celebrity individuals can temporarily become influencers through viral civic content.

These cases help analyze message framing, language use, emotional tone, symbolism, and narrative style, which aligns with the Two-Step Flow of Communication, where influencers act as intermediaries between information and audiences.

6.4.2. Research Question 2

How does engagement with influencer-generated civic content affect young adults' civic attitudes, such as awareness, opinion formation, and sense of civic responsibility?

6.4.2.1. Case Studies Mapped

- Sharmistha Panoli Controversy (Case Study 3)
- Murshidabad Fake News Account Blocking (Case Study 5)
- Roddur Roy (Case Study 2) Justification

This research question examines the impact of exposure and engagement with influencer content on young people's civic attitudes. Civic attitudes include political awareness, perceptions of justice, trust in institutions, freedom of speech, and social responsibility.

The Sharmistha Panoli case highlights how influencer content can trigger strong reactions and shape youth opinions on civic rights, law enforcement, and communal sensitivity.

- The fake news crackdown in Murshidabad shows how misinformation amplified by influential accounts can negatively affect civic trust and social harmony.
- Roddur Roy's case again helps examine polarization and emotional engagement, showing how repeated exposure can reinforce or challenge existing civic beliefs.

This mapping aligns with the Digital Influence Model, where attention and engagement serve as pathways through which attitudes are formed or modified.

6.4.3. Research Question 3

How do credibility, relatability, and engagement mediate the relationship between influencer content and civic attitude formation among young adults?

6.4.3.1. Case Studies Mapped

- Saif Sarkar (Case Study 1)
- Local Youth Civic Mobilisation Case (Case Study 6)
- Viral Activist Video (Case Study 4)

6.5 Justification

This question explores why young audiences trust and responds to certain influencers more than others. Credibility and relatability are crucial mediators in the influencer-audience relationship.

- Saif Sarkar's perceived authenticity and educational tone enhance trust and long-term engagement.
- Youth-led digital mobilisation campaigns reflect peer-to-peer credibility, where audiences trust content created by people similar to themselves.
- The viral activist video demonstrates how perceived moral authority and courage can temporarily establish credibility and influence civic perceptions.

This directly connects to Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains how young users actively choose content that satisfies their informational, social, and identity needs.

6.5.1. Summary of Mapping

Each research question is strategically mapped to multiple case studies to:

- Capture different forms of influencer communication
- Examine both positive and negative civic influence
- Understand mediating factors like engagement and credibility
- Ensure theoretical and methodological consistency

This mapping strengthens the validity and depth of the study.

6.6. Data Collection Methods: Content Analysis

This study uses content analysis as the main method for collecting data. Content analysis means closely studying social media content to understand what messages are being shared and how people react to them. Since this research focuses on social media influencers and civic attitudes, content analysis is the most suitable method.

6.6.1. Why Content Analysis Was Chosen Content analysis was chosen because:

- The research is about online content
- Influencers mainly communicate through posts and videos
- Civic attitudes are reflected in comments, reactions, and discussions
- The method allows detailed understanding without interacting directly with users
- This method helps the researcher observe real and natural behaviour on social media platforms.

6.6.2. Sources of Data

The data for this study was collected from publicly available social media content. The platforms used include:

- YouTube
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter (X)

Only public posts were studied. No private accounts or messages were accessed.

- How the Content Was Collected

The content was collected by:

- Saving video links and post URLs
- Taking screenshots where needed
- Writing notes about the main message of each post
- Recording basic engagement details like number of likes and comments All collected content was organised case-wise for easy analysis.

6.6.3. What Was Observed in the Content

While collecting the content, the researcher focused on:

- The main civic issue being discussed
- The tone of the message (informative, emotional, critical)
- The language used (especially Bengali or local expressions)
- The way influencers explained or framed the issue
- The type of reactions from young audiences
- These observations helped connect the content with civic attitudes.

6.6.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical care was taken during data collection:

- Only public content was analysed
- No usernames or personal details of commenters were used

- Content was studied respectfully and for academic purposes only
- The study did not harm or misrepresent any individual

6.7. Data Analysis Techniques

This study uses content analysis to understand how social media influencers affect the civic attitudes of young adults (16–35 years) in urban areas of West Bengal. Content analysis means carefully studying social media posts, videos, captions, and comments to identify common ideas and patterns.

Since this research follows a case study approach, the analysis focuses on what influencers say, how they say it, and how young audiences react to it online.

Step 1: Collecting and Reading the Content

First, social media content from the selected six case studies was collected. This included:

- Videos
- Written posts and captions
- Public comments
- Visual elements like images, text on screen, and thumbnails

Each post or video was watched and read multiple times to understand the message clearly and to see how it related to civic issues such as politics, freedom of expression, social justice, law and order, and misinformation.

Step 2: Identifying Important Ideas

Next, important ideas were noted from the content. These ideas included:

- Talking about political or social problems
- Expressing anger or support
- Explaining civic issues in simple language
- Criticising government or institutions

- Spreading awareness or, in some cases, misinformation

These ideas were marked and grouped based on similarity.

Step 3: Grouping Similar Ideas

The identified ideas were grouped into simple categories such as:

- Type of civic issue (politics, law, rights, social issues)
- Style of communication (informative, emotional, satirical)
- Audience reaction (support, disagreement, debate)
- Trust and credibility (whether people believed the influencer or not) This helped in understanding common patterns across different case studies.

Step 4: Finding Common Patterns

After grouping the content, common patterns were identified. For example:

- Certain styles of content received more attention
- Emotional posts attracted more comments
- Content in local language created stronger reactions
- These patterns helped explain how influencers shape civic attitudes.

Step 5: Interpreting the Meaning

Finally, these patterns were interpreted to understand:

- How influencers influence young people's thinking
- What type of content affects civic awareness the most
- Why some influencers are trusted more than others
- This step connects the content to the research questions and objectives.

7. Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study in a clear and easy way. The findings are based on the content analysis of six case studies related to social media influencers and civic issues in West Bengal.

7.1. Influencers Help Young People Understand Civic Issues

One important finding is that social media influencers help young people understand civic and political issues.

7.1.1. Influencers explain complex topics in simple language.

7.1.2. They break down news, events, and controversies so that young audiences can understand them easily.

This shows that influencers act like informal teachers or explainers for civic matters.

- Local Language and Culture Matter a Lot
- Content shared in Bengali and connected to local culture received more attention and engagement.
- Young people felt more connected to influencers who spoke their language.
- Local examples made civic issues feel more real and relatable.
- This shows that cultural familiarity increases interest and understanding.
- Emotional Content Gets More Attention
- Posts and videos that showed strong emotions like anger, sadness, or injustice attracted more likes, shares, and comments.
- People reacted strongly to content related to police action, freedom of speech, or social injustice.
- Emotional content made young people think more deeply about civic issues.

- However, emotional content sometimes also created arguments and conflict.

7.2. Trust in Influencers Is Very Important Young audiences trusted influencers who:

- Spoke honestly
- Explained things clearly
- Were consistent in their opinions

When people felt an influencer was spreading false or misleading information, trust reduced quickly.This shows that credibility plays a major role in shaping civic attitudes.

7.3. High Engagement Is Not Always Positive

- Many posts received high engagement, but this did not always mean positive impact.
- Some posts created confusion or fear.
- Some discussions became aggressive or divided.
- Misinformation sometimes increased distrust in institutions.
- So, influencer impact can be both positive and negative.

7.4. Influencers Change Thinking More Than Action

The study found that influencers mostly affect:

- Awareness
- Opinions
- Attitudes
- They influence how young people think, but they do not always push them to take real-world civic action like voting or protests.

Young People Are Not Passive Young audiences actively:

- Question influencers
- Argue in comments

- Share their own opinions

This shows that young people do not blindly follow influencers but think and react on their own.

7.5. Overall Summary of Findings

- Influencers play a strong role in shaping civic thinking.
- Language, emotions, and trust matter more than popularity.
- Civic influence is complex and not always positive.
- Social media is a powerful space for civic discussion among youth.

The findings show that social media influencers have a clear influence on civic attitudes among young adults in urban West Bengal. This influence works mainly through simple explanations, emotional connection, and trust, rather than direct instruction or pressure.

8. Discussion

This chapter discusses the key findings of the study in relation to the research objectives, research questions, and conceptual framework. It explains how social media influencers shape civic attitudes among young adults in urban areas of West Bengal. Rather than repeating the findings, this section interprets their meaning and significance. The discussion highlights the role of influencers as civic interpreters and examines how young audiences actively engage with, question, and respond to influencer content. It also connects the findings to established communication theories, showing how digital engagement, credibility, and emotional framing influence civic thinking.

8.1. Influencers as Civic Interpreters and Opinion Leaders

One of the most important interpretations from the findings is that social media influencers function as civic interpreters rather than simple information sharers. Influencers do not merely repeat news or civic information; instead, they frame, explain, and personalise civic issues for their audiences.

This supports the Two-Step Flow of Communication, which suggests that information often flows from media to opinion leaders and then to the wider public. In this study, influencers acted as opinion leaders who:

- Simplified complex civic issues
- Added personal opinions or emotional framing
- Helped young audiences make sense of events

This interpretation aligns with the first research objective, which aimed to understand how influencers communicate civic content. The findings show that influencers play a mediating role, shaping not just awareness but also interpretation.

8.2. Youth as Active Consumers of Civic Content

A central finding of this study and a key focus of this discussion is that young people are active consumers, not passive recipients, of influencer content.

The content analysis clearly showed that:

- Young users questioned influencers in comments
- They debated with each other
- They expressed agreement, disagreement, and alternative viewpoints

This directly supports Uses and Gratifications Theory, which argues that audiences actively select and use media based on their needs. Young audiences engaged with influencer content to:

- Gain information
- Express opinions
- Form identity
- Participate in civic discussions

Rather than blindly following influencers, youth used influencer content as a starting point for discussion and

reflection. This interpretation answers the second research question, which examined how engagement with influencer content affects civic attitudes.

8.3. Role of Language and Regional Identity

Another key interpretation is the strong influence of local language and cultural context. Content in Bengali and content that referenced local events, issues, or cultural symbols generated higher engagement and stronger emotional responses.

This suggests that civic influence is context-dependent. Youth are more likely to engage with and trust content that:

- Reflects their lived realities
- Uses familiar language
- Acknowledges regional identity

This finding supports the Digital Influence Model, particularly the role of relatability as a mediator between content and attitude formation. It also explains why local influencers often have greater civic impact than national or global figures among regional youth.

8.4. Emotional Framing and Civic Attitude Formation

The findings showed that emotional content especially content expressing anger, injustice, or urgency received higher engagement. The discussion here highlights that emotions play a powerful role in shaping civic attitudes.

Emotional framing helped:

- Draw attention to civic issues
- Trigger discussions and debates
- Strengthen opinions

However, the discussion also shows that emotional influence is double-edged. While it increases awareness, it can also:

- Create polarisation
- Spread misinformation
- Reinforce existing biases

This interpretation is important because it highlights that influencer impact is not always positive. It supports the third research objective, which explored mediating factors such as engagement and credibility.

8.5. Credibility as the Core of Influence

Across all case studies, credibility emerged as a key factor determining influence. Youth trusted influencers who were:

- Consistent
- Transparent
- Clear in their communication
- Perceived as authentic

This aligns strongly with the Digital Influence Model, which places credibility at the centre of attitude change. Even highly popular influencers lost influence when their credibility was questioned.

This discussion highlights that trust is more important than popularity, especially in civic communication.

8.6. Engagement Does Not Always Mean Positive Civic Impact

Another critical interpretation is that high engagement does not always result in healthy civic attitudes. Some content generated large numbers of comments and shares but also:

- Increased confusion
- Spread fear
- Reduced trust in institutions

This finding complicates the common assumption that engagement equals positive impact. The discussion shows that quality of engagement matters more than quantity.

8.7. Cognitive Influence Over Behavioural Change The study found that influencers mainly influenced:

- Awareness
- Opinions

- Attitudes

They had less impact on:

- Actual civic behaviour
- Offline participation

This suggests that influencer influence is strongest at the cognitive and emotional level. This interpretation is significant because it clarifies the scope of influencer impact and avoids exaggerated claims. Theoretical Implications The discussion confirms that:

- Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why youth engage
- Two-Step Flow explains how influence is mediated
- Digital Influence Model explains how attitudes are shaped
- Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of influencer-led civic communication.

8.8. Overall Interpretation

Overall, the discussion shows that social media influencers play a significant but complex role in shaping civic attitudes. Youth are active participants who interpret, challenge, and negotiate influencer messages rather than accepting them passively.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the role of social media influencers in shaping civic attitudes among young adult digital audiences (16–35 years) in urban areas of West Bengal using a qualitative case study approach and content analysis.

Summary of Key Findings

- Social media influencers act as interpreters of civic issues, not just information sharers.
- Young people are active consumers who question, debate, and reinterpret influencer content.

- Local language and cultural context significantly enhance civic engagement.
- Emotional content attracts attention but can also lead to polarization.
- Credibility is more important than popularity in shaping civic attitudes.
- High engagement does not always result in positive civic outcomes.
- Influencers influence thinking and awareness more than direct civic action.

9.1. Achievement of Research Objectives The study successfully:

- Examined how influencers communicate civic content
- Analysed how engagement shapes civic attitudes

9.1.1. Identified credibility and relatability as key mediating factors Thus, all research objectives and questions were addressed.

9.2. Implications of the Study Academic Implications

- Contributes regional insight to influencer and civic communication research

9.2.1. Strengthens understanding of youth as active audiences Social Implications

9.2.2. Highlights the need for responsible influencer communication

9.2.3. Emphasises digital literacy among youth Policy Implications

- Suggests the need for ethical guidelines for civic influencers
- Supports media literacy initiatives
- Compare different regions

10. Recommendations

This study shows that social media influencers strongly affect how young people in urban West Bengal think about civic and social issues. Based on these findings, the following simple and practical recommendations are suggested.

- Platforms should be transparent about content algorithms.
- Civic and political content should be clearly labelled.
- Fake news and hate speech must be controlled.
- Influencers should verify facts and clarify personal opinions.
- Influencers should promote respectful discussions.
- Young users should verify information and think before sharing.
- Digital literacy should be taught in education.
- Ethical rules for online civic content are needed.
- Platforms, influencers, educators, and policymakers must work together.
- Future studies should include rural areas and more platforms.

11. Limitations

Every research study has some limitations, and this study is no exception.

- The study covers only urban areas of West Bengal; rural and semi-urban areas are excluded.
- Only content analysis was used; no surveys or interviews were conducted.
- Audience views were inferred from comments and reactions, which may not fully reflect real opinions.
- The study focuses only on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (X). Other platforms and private messaging spaces were not included.

- The analysis is limited to a specific time period; trends may change over time.
- Interpretation-based analysis may involve some researcher bias.
- Despite these limitations, the study offers useful insights into influencer impact on civic attitudes.

12. Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following areas are suggested for future research:

- Future studies can include rural and semi-urban areas of West Bengal.
- Different research methods like surveys and interviews can be used.
- Other age groups below 16 and above 35 can be studied.
- Platform-specific studies can focus on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or X.
- Long-term impact on real-life civic actions can be examined.
- Different types of influencers can be compared.
- Ethical issues like misinformation and algorithm bias can be studied.
- Comparisons with other Indian states can be made.

These future research directions can help develop a deeper understanding of the role of social media influencers in shaping civic attitudes in India.

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Digital health communication and media literacy as tools for civic engagement in India

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital media and information technologies has significantly transformed health communication practices in India, reshaping how citizens access, interpret, and engage with public health information. Government-led digital initiatives such as the National Health Mission (NHM), Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), and the CoWIN platform have expanded the reach of health communication and encouraged citizen participation in health-related decision-making. However, alongside these developments, the spread of health-related misinformation and disinformation through social media and digital platforms has emerged as a serious challenge to public trust and civic responsibility. This paper examines the role of digital health communication and media literacy in fostering civic engagement in the Indian context. It adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing on policy documents, government reports, and existing scholarly literature to explore how media literacy enables citizens to critically evaluate digital health information and participate more responsibly in public discourse. The study highlights that media-literate citizens are better equipped to distinguish credible health information from misleading content, thereby contributing to informed civic engagement and collective public health action. The paper further argues that digital health communication functions not only as a tool for information dissemination but also as a platform for civic participation, where citizens engage with health campaigns, share experiences, and hold

institutions accountable. Strengthening media literacy is therefore essential for enhancing democratic participation, reducing the impact of health misinformation, and promoting inclusive public health communication. The study concludes that integrating media literacy initiatives within digital health communication strategies can significantly improve civic engagement and public health outcomes in India's evolving digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Health Communication, Media Literacy, Civic Engagement, Health Misinformation, India

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of health communication in India. Over the last decade, the proliferation of smartphones, internet connectivity, and social media platforms has enabled health information to reach citizens more quickly and widely than ever before. Digital platforms are now used extensively by government agencies, healthcare providers, and civil society organizations to disseminate public health messages, promote preventive behaviour, and mobilize communities during health emergencies. Initiatives such as the National Health Mission (NHM), Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), and digital platforms like CoWIN have demonstrated how digital communication can strengthen citizen engagement in public health governance. Through these platforms, citizens are no longer passive recipients of health messages but increasingly become participants in health-related decision-making, information sharing, and feedback processes.

India's digital health ecosystem has expanded rapidly in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of digital applications for vaccination registration, telemedicine, and health data management has brought millions of citizens into direct interaction with state health institutions. This transformation has enhanced accessibility and transparency in public health communication. At the same time, however, it has increased citizens' exposure to a large volume of unverified and misleading information.

Social media platforms, messaging applications, and video-sharing sites have become primary sources of health-related information for many people, often replacing traditional sources such as doctors, newspapers, and public health authorities. While this shift has democratized access to information, it has also complicated the task of ensuring accuracy, reliability, and public trust.

One of the most significant challenges in this digital environment is the spread of health-related misinformation and disinformation. False claims about vaccines, miracle cures, dietary practices, and disease transmission have circulated widely on digital platforms, sometimes leading to harmful behaviours and reduced compliance with public health guidelines. In India, where digital literacy varies significantly across regions, age groups, and socio-economic categories, many citizens find it difficult to distinguish between credible health information and misleading content. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, misinformation about vaccines and treatments affected public perception and created hesitation and fear among sections of the population. Such developments demonstrate that digital health communication cannot be effective unless citizens possess the skills necessary to critically evaluate the information they encounter.

In this context, media literacy becomes a central component of effective digital health communication. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content in a critical and informed manner. In the health domain, media-literate citizens are better able to verify sources, assess the credibility of health messages, and make informed decisions regarding their well-being. Media literacy thus functions not only as an educational skill but also as a civic competence that supports responsible participation in public discourse. When citizens are media literate, they are more likely to engage constructively with digital health campaigns, challenge misinformation, and contribute to collective efforts to improve public health. Civic engagement is another key dimension of digital health communication.

Civic engagement in the health sector includes activities such as participating in health campaigns, sharing information within communities, interacting with public institutions, and advocating for better health services. Digital platforms have expanded the opportunities for such engagement by providing spaces where citizens can voice concerns, seek information, and collaborate with others. For example, social media and online forums allow people to discuss health issues, mobilize support for health initiatives, and hold institutions accountable. When combined with media literacy, these digital spaces can strengthen democratic participation and promote a more informed and active citizenry.

Despite the growing importance of digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement, these concepts are often studied separately in academic research. Health communication studies frequently focus on message design and campaign effectiveness, while media literacy research tends to emphasize educational outcomes and critical thinking skills. Similarly, studies on civic engagement often examine political participation without adequately considering the role of health communication in shaping civic responsibility. In the Indian context, there is a particular need for integrated research that examines how digital health communication and media literacy together influence citizens' engagement with public health issues. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring how digital health communication, supported by media literacy, can function as a tool for enhancing civic engagement in India. By analysing policy initiatives, digital health platforms, and existing scholarly literature, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how citizens interact with digital health information and how this interaction shapes their participation in public health. The focus on India is especially important given the country's large and diverse population, rapid digitalization, and ongoing efforts to improve health outcomes through digital governance. By examining the interconnections between digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement, this paper contributes to

a broader understanding of how communication practices can support democratic participation and social development in the digital age. The study ultimately argues that strengthening media literacy within digital health communication strategies is essential for building informed, engaged, and responsible citizens who can actively participate in shaping India's public health future.

2. Review Of Literature

2.1. Digital Health Communication: Global and Indian Perspectives

The field of digital health communication has grown substantially over the last two decades as information technologies have become ubiquitous in people's lives. Globally, researchers have recognized that digital media can enhance public health outcomes by facilitating timely dissemination of health information and promoting health literacy. For example, Wilson et al. (2013) argued that digital platforms such as social media and online health portals can improve awareness and behavioral intention when used effectively in public health campaigns (Wilson et al., Journal of Health Communication). Similarly, Moorhead et al. (2013) in a systematic review concluded that social media enables greater reach and engagement for health promotion by providing spaces where users share experiences and health advice, thereby amplifying key messages (Moorhead et al., Journal of Medical Internet Research). In the Indian context, digital health communication has been studied predominantly in relation to large-scale public health initiatives. Rajan and Sen (2020) examined the role of digital media in disseminating maternal and child health information in rural Uttar Pradesh, finding that mobile messaging and interactive voice response systems increased awareness among low-income women (Indian Journal of Public Health Research & Development). Similarly, Singh and Kaur (2021) analyzed the use of WhatsApp by community health workers in Punjab to provide timely vaccinations updates, highlighting improvements in vaccine adherence (Media Asia). Both studies reinforce that digital

platform, when aligned with community health strategies, can bridge communication gaps in underserved areas. However, several researchers have also pointed out that the effectiveness of digital health communication is contingent on other social and institutional factors. Gupta and Bhatia (2019) noted that digital messaging alone cannot ensure behavior change unless there is parallel investment in health infrastructure and community mobilization (Health Communication Research). This suggests that digital communication must be integrated with ground-level health efforts to achieve sustained impact.

2.2. Media Literacy Research: Foundations and Health Applications

Media literacy research has evolved from early work emphasizing critical viewing skills in the 20th century to contemporary studies focusing on digital information environments. Buckingham (2003) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms a framework widely adopted by scholars across disciplines (Media Education: Literacy, Learning, and Contemporary Culture). In the health domain, Hobbs (2010) demonstrated that media literacy interventions can significantly improve individuals' ability to critically evaluate health messages and resist misinformation, particularly when coupled with classroom or community training (Journal of Communication Education). Internationally, research by Vraga and Tully (2021) highlighted the role of media literacy in combating health misinformation on social media. Their experimental studies showed that participants with higher media literacy scores were significantly more likely to identify misleading public health posts correctly and less likely to share them (Health Communication). This finding is particularly relevant given the proliferation of digital misinformation in recent years.

In India, media literacy research is still emerging, especially in relation to health communication. Kumar (2018) explored media literacy levels among urban youth, showing that while young adults are heavy users of digital platforms,

they often lack the skills necessary to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources (International Journal of Communication Research). More recently, Banerjee and Chakraborty (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study with rural adolescents in West Bengal, revealing that targeted media literacy workshops increased participants' skepticism of health misinformation and improved their search for authoritative health information (Indian Journal of Media and Communication). These Indian studies underscore that media literacy is not merely a cognitive skill but a mediating factor that influences how people interpret and act on health communication.

2.3. Civic Engagement and Digital Participation: Linking Health and Citizenship

Civic engagement traditionally refers to citizens' involvement in public life to influence community and policy outcomes (Putnam, 2000; Bowling Alone). In the digital age, scholars argue that online platforms have expanded the scope of civic engagement. According to Boulianne (2015), digital media can facilitate political and social participation by lowering barriers to communication and enabling collective action (New Media & Society). In the health context, digital civic engagement includes activities such as participating in online health discussions, sharing personal health experiences on social media, and engaging with health authorities through digital feedback channels.

Several studies document this trend internationally. For example, Brunton et al. (2019) found that participatory digital campaigns, such as hashtag movements supporting mental health awareness, led to measurable increases in community engagement and resource sharing (Journal of Public Health Policy). Similarly, Xie et al. (2020) analyzed engagement metrics from public health campaigns on Weibo, showing that interactive content significantly enhanced community responses compared to static messaging (Telematics and Informatics).

Indian research into digital civic engagement in health is limited but expanding. Mishra and Sinha (2021) examined how Twitter was used by citizens during the second wave of COVID-19 in India to share real-time information about hospital beds, oxygen supplies, and vaccination slots. Their analysis revealed that digital civic engagement helped fill critical information gaps during emergencies (Indian Journal of Communication Studies). Another notable study by Roy and Das (2022) investigated online patient groups on Facebook, finding that peer-to-peer support and shared experiences enhanced community resilience and collective problem-solving (Asian Journal of Communication).

However, scholars also caution that digital engagement is not automatically democratic or constructive. Dasgupta (2020) argued that digital participation can be skewed by socio-economic inequalities, where more privileged groups dominate online spaces, leaving marginalized voices underrepresented (Communication Research Trends). This points to the need for media literacy and inclusive digital policies that empower diverse segments of society.

2.4. Synthesis: Gaps and Opportunities

Three key patterns emerge from the literature:

- Digital health communication has potential for broad outreach but its effectiveness depends on contextual factors such as infrastructure, literacy, and trust.
- Media literacy is a strong predictor of individuals' ability to critically engage with health content, yet empirical work in the Indian context remains limited.
- Civic engagement through digital platforms is evident in crisis contexts (e.g., COVID-19), but sustained participatory practices and their links to health outcomes are underexplored.

Specifically, there is a dearth of integrated research that simultaneously examines:

- Digital health communication
- Media literacy competencies

- Civic engagement outcomes

specially in the Indian socio-cultural context. Most studies explore these themes in isolation, limiting theoretical synthesis and policy relevance.

2.5. Conclusion of Review

The literature suggests that while digital media has transformed health communication and civic engagement opportunities globally, the interaction between digital health communication and media literacy in enhancing civic participation remains under-studied, particularly in India. Addressing this integrated gap is critical for understanding how digital health initiatives can be more effective in promoting informed and responsible civic engagement among diverse Indian populations.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of digital health communication in promoting civic engagement among Indian citizens in the context of public health.
- To analyze how media literacy influences people's ability to identify, evaluate, and respond to health-related information circulated through digital platforms.
- To investigate the relationship between media literacy and the spread of health misinformation in the Indian digital environment.
- To assess how digital platforms such as social media, websites, and mobile applications are used for public health communication in India.
- To explore the impact of digital health communication on public participation, awareness, and trust in health institutions.
- To identify the challenges faced by Indian users in accessing and interpreting digital health information.

3.1. Research Questions

- How does digital health communication influence civic engagement in public health issues in India?
- What role does media literacy play in enabling citizens to critically evaluate digital health information?
- How does media literacy affect the spread and acceptance of health misinformation in India?
- Which digital platforms are most effective for health communication and public participation?
- What challenges do Indian citizens face while accessing and understanding online health information?

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement in India. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the absence of primary field data at this stage, the study relies on secondary data analysis, including policy documents, government reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how digital platforms are used in health communication and how media literacy shapes public engagement in the Indian context.

5.1. Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive research design is used to analyze how digital health communication operates within India's public health system and how citizens engage with digital health information. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it enables the exploration of meanings, patterns, and interpretations rather than numerical measurement. Since health communication involves complex interactions between institutions, media, and citizens, a qualitative framework provides deeper insights into how information is produced, circulated, and received.

The study is guided by a document analysis approach, which involves the systematic examination of official policy documents, government portals, and academic publications related to digital health communication, media literacy, and civic participation. This method helps identify recurring themes, policy priorities, and communication strategies used by the Indian government and public health agencies.

5.2. Data Sources

The study uses multiple secondary data sources to ensure credibility and triangulation:

5.2.1 Government Policy Documents and Digital Platforms

Key national policy frameworks and digital health platforms were analyzed, including:

- National Health Mission (NHM): To understand the government's communication strategies for public health awareness and outreach.
- Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM): To examine how digital infrastructure is used for health data, patient records, and communication.
- CoWIN Portal: To analyze digital communication during India's COVID-19 vaccination campaign and its role in public engagement.

These documents and portals provide insight into how the Indian state uses digital tools to communicate health information, promote participation, and manage public health initiatives.

5.2.2. Government Reports

Reports from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, NITI Aayog, and Press Information Bureau (PIB) were examined to understand the scope and impact of digital health initiatives. These reports include data on digital adoption, vaccination outreach, telemedicine services, and public communication strategies.

Such reports are valuable because they reflect official narratives, performance indicators, and policy objectives related to digital health and citizen engagement.

5.2.3. Scholarly Literature

Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research reports on:

- Digital health communication
- Media literacy
- Health misinformation
- Civic and digital engagement

were systematically reviewed. International journals such as Health Communication, Journal of Medical Internet Research, and New Media & Society, along with Indian journals like Indian Journal of Communication Studies and Media Asia, were used to provide both global and local perspectives.

5.3. Data Collection Procedure

Relevant documents and academic articles were identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and government websites. Keywords such as digital health communication, media literacy in India, health misinformation, and civic engagement were used to locate appropriate sources.

Only documents published between 2015 and 2024 were included to ensure contemporary relevance, particularly in light of India's rapid digital transformation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.4. Data Analysis Technique

The collected materials were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved:

- Familiarization – Reading and re-reading documents to understand content and context.
- Coding – Identifying key concepts related to health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement.

- Theme Development – Grouping codes into broader themes such as government digital outreach, misinformation challenges, citizen participation, and media literacy gaps.

- Interpretation – Linking these themes to the research objectives and theoretical framework.

This method allows patterns and relationships to emerge from the data, offering a structured way to interpret large volumes of textual material.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

Since the study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data, no direct human participants were involved. Therefore, issues of informed consent or personal data protection do not arise. However, care was taken to accurately represent government documents and scholarly sources without misinterpretation or misquotation.

5.6. Limitations of the Study

A key limitation of this methodology is the absence of primary field data such as surveys or interviews. While secondary data provides a broad understanding of trends and policies, it does not capture individual experiences or grassroots perspectives. Future research may incorporate interviews with health workers, citizens, and media professionals to deepen empirical insights.

5.7. Justification of Method

Despite its limitations, this methodology is well suited for the present study because it allows for a systematic and theory-driven examination of digital health communication and media literacy in India. The use of government policies and scholarly literature ensures that the findings are grounded in both practice and academic theory, making the study relevant for policymakers, researchers, and public health communicators.

6. Analysis And Discussion

This section interprets the findings emerging from the analysis

of policy documents, government reports, and scholarly literature to explain how digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement interact in the Indian context. The discussion is organized around five major themes: digital platforms in health campaigns, citizen participation, the role of social media, media literacy outcomes, and key Indian examples such as COVID-19, vaccination, and Ayushman Bharat.

6.1. Digital Platforms in Indian Health Campaigns

India's public health system has undergone a significant transformation through the adoption of digital platforms. The National Health Mission (NHM), Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), and CoWIN platform illustrate how digital infrastructures have become central to health communication. These platforms are not merely administrative tools but also function as communication channels that connect the state with citizens. The CoWIN portal, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled citizens to register for vaccination, receive appointment updates, download certificates, and access official information about vaccines. This integration of service delivery and communication enhanced public trust and transparency. Similarly, ABDM provides a digital ecosystem where citizens can access health records and interact with health services, which strengthens informational continuity and engagement with the healthcare system. From a communication perspective, these platforms reflect a shift from one-way dissemination of information to interactive digital engagement, where citizens are active participants in managing their health. This supports the argument that digital health communication is no longer limited to awareness campaigns but is embedded in governance and service delivery.

6.2. Citizen Participation in Digital Health Communication

One of the most important findings from this study is that digital platforms have expanded opportunities for civic participation in health matters. Indian citizens now engage with health systems not only as patients but also as informed users, content sharers, and feedback providers.

During COVID-19, citizens used digital tools to:

- Share information about hospital beds and oxygen availability
- Alert others about vaccination slots
- Disseminate official health advisories

This form of participation represents digital civic engagement, where individuals contribute to collective well-being through information sharing and online coordination. Unlike traditional civic engagement, which relied on physical meetings and institutional channels, digital participation allowed citizens to act rapidly and collaboratively during a public health crisis.

However, the quality of this engagement depends on information accuracy and digital competence. When users are media literate, civic engagement becomes constructive. When they are not, it can amplify panic and misinformation. Thus, digital participation is both an opportunity and a risk.

6.3. Role of Social Media in Health Communication

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), and YouTube have become central to India's health communication ecosystem. Government agencies, health professionals, and citizens all use these platforms to share health information.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government used social media extensively to:

- Promote mask-wearing and vaccination
- Counter rumors
- Provide real-time updates

Health ministries, state governments, and even district authorities maintained active social media accounts to disseminate verified information. This enhanced reach, especially among young and urban populations.

At the same time, social media also became a major source of misinformation. False claims about vaccines, home remedies, and virus origins circulated widely. This demonstrates that social media functions as a double-edged sword it can empower public health communication but also undermine it.

The effectiveness of social media therefore depends not only on institutional messaging but also on citizens' ability to critically evaluate content, which brings media literacy into focus.

6.4. Media Literacy and Its Impact on Health Information

Media literacy plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals engage with digital health communication. Media-literate users are better able to:

- Distinguish credible from unreliable sources
- Cross-check health claims
- Avoid sharing misleading content

In the Indian context, where digital access has expanded faster than digital education, many users encounter health information without adequate critical skills. This gap makes them vulnerable to misinformation, particularly on encrypted platforms like WhatsApp.

Government initiatives such as PIB Fact Check, MyGov, and health ministry advisories attempt to correct misinformation, but their effectiveness depends on users' willingness and ability to trust and verify official sources. When media literacy is high, citizens are more likely to:

- Follow evidence-based health advice
- Participate responsibly in online discussions
- Support public health measures

Thus, media literacy acts as a mediating variable between digital health communication and civic engagement.

6.5. Indian Examples: COVID-19, Vaccination, and Ayushman Bharat

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a powerful illustration of how digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement interact. The CoWIN platform facilitated the world's largest vaccination drive, while social media enabled rapid dissemination of information. Citizens actively participated by booking slots, sharing updates, and encouraging others to get vaccinated.

However, vaccine hesitancy fueled by misinformation also emerged. Rumors about side effects and conspiracy theories spread online, particularly in communities with low media literacy. This demonstrates that digital access alone is not enough; critical engagement is equally necessary. Similarly, Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission aims to create a digitally empowered health ecosystem. Its success depends on citizens' ability to understand, trust, and use digital health services. Media literacy determines whether people see these platforms as helpful tools or as confusing and unreliable systems.

6.7. Integrating Digital Communication, Media Literacy, and Civic Engagement

The analysis shows that digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement are deeply interconnected. Digital platforms provide the infrastructure, media literacy shapes interpretation, and civic engagement reflects how people act on health information.

In India, where public health challenges are vast and diverse, this integration is especially important. Effective digital health communication can strengthen democratic participation by enabling citizens to engage with health policies, demand accountability, and support collective well-being.

7. Conclusion of the Discussion

The findings suggest that India's digital health initiatives have created unprecedented opportunities for public engagement. However, the quality and impact of this engagement depend heavily on media literacy. To maximize the benefits of digital

health communication, India must invest not only in digital infrastructure but also in critical digital education, ensuring that citizens can participate meaningfully and responsibly in the digital public sphere.

8. Findings

This study analyzed government policy documents, digital health platforms, and scholarly literature to understand how digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement interact in the Indian context. The key findings are summarized below.

8.1. Media-literate citizens engage more responsibly

One of the most significant findings is that media literacy strongly influences how citizens participate in digital health communication. Individuals who possess higher levels of media literacy are better able to evaluate the credibility of online health information, identify misinformation, and avoid sharing unverified content. These users are more likely to consult official government platforms, follow scientific guidelines, and engage constructively in online discussions related to health issues. In contrast, citizens with lower media literacy are more vulnerable to misleading messages, which can result in panic, mistrust, and the spread of false information. This demonstrates that media literacy acts as a critical filter between digital content and civic behavior.

8.2. Digital health communication improves awareness and participation

The study finds that digital health communication has significantly improved public awareness and participation in health initiatives in India. Platforms such as CoWIN, Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), and government social media channels have enabled citizens to access real-time information about vaccination, health services, and disease prevention. These tools have made health information more accessible, especially during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital platforms have also increased opportunities for citizens to interact with health

authorities, register for services, and receive updates, thereby strengthening their involvement in public health systems.

8.3. Misinformation weakens public trust

Despite the benefits of digital communication, the study reveals that health misinformation remains a major challenge. False or misleading health content circulated through social media and messaging apps has contributed to confusion, fear, and skepticism toward medical advice and government health programs. This misinformation undermines public trust in health institutions and reduces compliance with preventive measures such as vaccination and testing. The findings indicate that without adequate media literacy and effective fact-checking mechanisms, digital platforms can become channels for harmful narratives rather than reliable health communication.

8.4. Overall Insight

The findings clearly show that while digital health communication has the potential to enhance awareness and civic engagement, its success depends largely on the level of media literacy among citizens. Strengthening media literacy is therefore essential for building informed, responsible, and trust-based participation in India's digital health ecosystem.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between digital health communication, media literacy, and civic engagement in India, using secondary data drawn from policy documents, government platforms, and scholarly research. The findings clearly demonstrate that digital technologies have fundamentally reshaped how health information is produced, circulated, and consumed in the country. Platforms such as CoWIN and the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission have not only improved service delivery but also created new opportunities for citizens to actively engage with public health systems. In this sense, digital health communication has become a powerful tool for enhancing transparency, awareness, and participation in India's healthcare governance.

However, the study also reveals that the benefits of digital health communication are not automatic. Media literacy plays a crucial mediating role in determining whether digital platforms promote informed engagement or contribute to confusion and mistrust. Media-literate citizens are better equipped to evaluate the credibility of health messages, avoid misinformation, and participate responsibly in online discussions related to public health. Conversely, limited media literacy increases vulnerability to false and misleading content, which can weaken public trust in health institutions and undermine the effectiveness of health campaigns. This makes media literacy not merely an educational concern, but a public health and democratic issue.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that India's investment in digital health infrastructure must be complemented by a strong focus on digital and media literacy. While initiatives like ABDM and CoWIN have expanded access to health services, their long-term success depends on citizens' ability to understand and critically engage with digital information. Government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations should therefore collaborate to integrate media literacy training into public health outreach, school curricula, and community programs. Strengthening fact-checking mechanisms and promoting transparent communication through official digital channels are also essential to counter misinformation and build public trust. The study also highlights the need for more inclusive digital health strategies. Socio-economic and educational inequalities influence how different groups access and interpret online health information. Policies must therefore ensure that digital health communication is accessible, multilingual, and culturally sensitive, so that no section of society is excluded from meaningful participation. In terms of future research, this study provides a conceptual foundation but also points to several areas that require further investigation. Future studies could incorporate primary data through surveys, interviews, or ethnographic research to capture citizens lived experiences of digital health communication. Comparative

studies across rural and urban contexts, or among different age and socio-economic groups, would provide deeper insight into how media literacy shapes civic engagement. Additionally, longitudinal research could help assess how sustained exposure to digital health platforms influences trust, behavior, and participation over time. In conclusion, digital health communication holds immense potential to strengthen public health and democratic engagement in India, but its success ultimately depends on building a media-literate and critically informed citizenry.

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A Study on Consumer Awareness of Misleading Advertisements and Its Impact on Buying Behaviour

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Abstract:

Advertising is the means of information as well as influencing the general public to buy a product or service through visual or oral or written messages. The Advertising Industry has seen tremendous growth in India in the last few decades, money spent on advertisement has increased dramatically in recent years. Television advertising has emerged as the most influential and widely preferred medium in the Indian advertising industry, surpassing traditional print and radio platforms. The advent of satellite channels and regional networks has transformed television into a powerful communication tool that effectively reaches diverse audiences across urban and rural India.

The combination of visual appeal, audio-visual storytelling, and mass outreach gives television advertisements a greater impact on consumer perception. Hence television advertising remains one of the most influential forms of mass communication, significantly shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. However, with increase in competition, the advertisers are opting for false information and misleading ads to reach the high demand. Hence the use of misleading claims in television advertisements has raised significant concerns regarding consumer awareness and protection. This paper adopts a case study approach to examine the influence of misleading television advertisements on consumer awareness and buying behaviour. The study analyses data of selected cases of misleading television advertisements collected from published research articles,

legal judgments, reports of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), government publications, and consumer protection literature. The case study analysis highlights how misleading claims related to product quality, health benefits, and pricing influence consumer trust and purchasing decisions. The findings indicate that inadequate consumer awareness and limited media literacy contribute significantly to consumers' vulnerability to deceptive television advertising. Conversely, cases demonstrate that informed and aware consumers are better equipped to question advertising claims and make rational purchase decisions. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening consumer awareness initiatives, effective regulatory enforcement, and ethical advertising practices in television media, to protect consumer interest.

Keywords: Misleading Advertisements, Television Advertising, Consumer Awareness, Buying Behaviour, Advertising Regulation.

1. Introduction:

According to American Marketing Association (AMA): 'Advertising is any paid form of non- personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor". Basically, advertising is a means of public announcement, a form of persuasive communication, which involves communication with the public about a product, idea or service through a medium which the public have access to. The communication is usually one-sided from the advertisers to the public. But information is not the sole purpose of advertisement. Its main purpose is to motivate its audience for a desired action. Today ads are all around us, be it conscious or unconscious we cannot escape from looking at it or listening to it. Advertising is mass communication of information intended to persuade buyers so as to maximize the profit. Ads serve as an important tool not only for manufacturers and traders, but also holds a significant importance for consumers and society at large. Advertising plays a crucial role in modern market economies by informing consumers about products

and services and influencing their purchasing decisions. With the rapid expansion of mass media, particularly television and digital platforms, advertising has become more persuasive, visually appealing, and emotionally driven. Advertising can be called a game that is played among 4 key players, they are: The Advertiser: Advertising begins with the advertisers, the person or the organization that uses ad to send out a message about its product/service. They initiate the marketing effort by identifying the marketing strategy that the ad can solve and make the final. The 2nd player is the ad agency who creates the advertisement. They are hired to plan and implement all or part of the ad. Their main function is to create, plan and manage ad campaigns for client to promote their product or service effectively to the target audience. They are responsible for all the creative content, final budget and shaping of the ad. Then comes the media, one of the most important players as they are the vehicles through which the ad reaches to its final destination, that is the audience. The Consumer or Target Audience are the final players of the game. The formulation of an ad strategy begins with identification of the target audience or the potential customer and the content is created to persuade them to get a desires action, which is to buy the product or service. Though the communication is mostly one-sided and audience are regarded as passive receiver but their action is very much desired as the success of the whole ad campaign depends upon the action of the audience. Hence, they are the most important player as they take the final call. In today's challenging market economy, ads have become an important element in the society. Moreover, it plays a powerful constructive role in the economic role of a country. Also, it has a high influence on an individual and the society as a whole. Hence it is important that ad professionals observe high ethical standards in regards to truthfulness, human dignity and social responsibility. However, alongside its positive role, advertising has also been criticized for promoting misleading and deceptive claims that distort consumer perception. Misleading advertisements refer to promotional messages that provide false information, exaggerate claims, or conceal important

facts, thereby creating a wrong impression in the minds of consumers. Misleading television advertisements often exaggerate product benefits, conceal material information, use ambiguous language, or present false representations related to quality, price, performance, or health benefits. Such advertisements distort consumer perception and influence buying decisions in ways that may not align with reality. In India, misleading advertisements are commonly observed in sectors such as healthcare, food and beverages, cosmetics, education, and financial services. These advertisements often exploit consumers' trust, lack of awareness, and emotional vulnerability. The regulators that exist in India today are not doing enough to tackle the problem and there are a lot of misleading advertisements today which trick the consumers. Loopholes are basically in implementation. There is also no proactive monitoring of the misleading advertisements. The most important problem is that all restriction, actions and regulations are followed after the ad is released and the consumers are exposed to the misinformation. Unless a complaint is registered, it is impossible to identify misleading advertisements. So, it is evident that the damage has already happened, plus the investigation & judgement process is very slow as it takes minimum 6-4 weeks for CCC to rake view on an advertisement & for ASCI to convey final decision. At best, what the self-regulatory body does is stopping a certain type of advertising well after the campaign is over. The violator gets away by issuing an apology letter in most of the time or in most cases the ad is asked to be modified or in serious cases if the damage is big the ad is withdrawn. The existing model of self-regulation (ASCI) is also not adequate and totally effective. The primary gaps that have been identified include limited consumer awareness about the complaint mechanism, resulting in very limited number of complaints compared to sizeable proportion of the problem; the advertising code which is dated and not able to keep pace with the changing trends; the mechanism is largely reactive in its approach and also takes longer period to take a final call which may have a great impact on the practical implications of the decisions. Under the guideline of ASCI the code is applied for the advertising

Industry which includes the Advertisers, The Advertising Agency and the Media but the accountability of scrutinized ad is restricted to the advertisers & the agency only and also the action of withdrawal or modification does not affect the media, when the advertisement is one of the largest revenue generators of the media. Though not creatively involved, but media stands as the medium or the bridge between the advertisers and the consumers. So they should also be held accountable and should be restricted with a guideline on what can be or can be not published or broadcasted.

2.1. Some of the principles one should follow while creating an ad to maintain high professional standards are:

- Ethical Advertising Standard: under the guideline of ASCI all ads should maintain an ethical standard for fairness in competition and good quality ads. They should address their customers with truthfulness and loyalty. They should not misguide the consumers and should follow a legal process in ad creation

- Decency: ads should not content statement or visual representation which impairs public confidence in advertising and should maintain prevailing standards of decency.

- Honest: ads should be so framed as not to abuse the trust of the consumers or exploit their lack of experience or knowledge. They should be truthful to what they produce.

- Social Responsibility: ads should not promote any form of discrimination, including that based upon race, nationality, religion, sex or age, nor should they in any way undermine human dignity.

- Truthful Presentation: ads should not contain any statement or visual representation which directly or indirectly question their true capacity and mislead the consumers. Exaggerated claims are likely to mislead the consumer by gaslighting them with false potentials.

- Comparison: ads containing comparison should be so designed that it should not likely to be misleading and should comply with the principles of fair competitions.

• Testimonials: ads should not contain or refer to any testimonials or endorsements unless it is genuine, verifiable and relevant and based on personal experience or knowledge.

• Safety and Health: ads should not without reason, justify on educational or social grounds, contain any visual representation or any description of dangerous practice or of situations, which shows disregards to safety or health.

Consumers with limited media literacy and awareness are particularly vulnerable to these deceptive practices. Hence Consumer awareness is a critical factor in determining how individuals interpret advertising messages and make purchasing decisions. An informed consumer is better equipped to evaluate advertising claims critically and avoid deceptive practices. Recognizing the growing threat of misleading advertisements, the Indian legal system has introduced regulatory frameworks such as Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act 1995, Telecommunicating Authority of India Act 1997, The Young Person (Harmful Publication) Act 1956, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, Drug & Magic Remedies (objectionable ads) Act 1954, the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, along with self-regulatory bodies like ASCI. Despite the existence of such legal and regulatory mechanisms, misleading television advertisements continue to appear across various product categories. This paper examines the issue of misleading advertisements from the perspective of consumer awareness and buying behaviour. The study seeks to understand how misleading television advertisements influence consumer decision-making and the role of awareness in protecting consumer interests. By analysing selected case studies based on secondary data, the study seeks to understand the effectiveness of existing regulatory mechanisms and the role of consumer awareness in protecting consumer rights. The analysis is confined to the role and effectiveness of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act in addressing misleading advertising practices. By focusing exclusively on these two regulatory mechanisms, the study aims to evaluate

their impact on protecting consumer interests and shaping informed purchasing decisions.

2. The Research Problem

In today's highly competitive media environment, audio-visual advertisements often exaggerate or manipulate facts to attract consumers. While such ads are designed to persuade, many cross ethical boundaries by making misleading claims about product quality, performance, or benefits. This not only deceives consumers but also undermines trust in the advertising industry and violates ethical norms. Despite the existence of comprehensive legal provisions and self-regulatory mechanisms, misleading advertisements continue to influence consumer decision-making. Advertisers frequently use exaggerated claims, emotional appeals, and celebrity endorsements to promote products, often blurring the line between persuasion and deception. This raises serious concerns regarding the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement and the level of consumer awareness.

A significant gap exists between regulatory intent and actual consumer protection. Many consumers remain unaware of their rights and the mechanisms available to address misleading advertisements. As a result, deceptive advertising practices persist, leading to financial loss, health risks, and erosion of consumer trust. The problem, therefore, lies in determining to what extent audio-visual advertisements present truthful information and how misleading claims and ethical violations affect consumer perception and decision-making and to highlight how awareness levels or the lack there of shape consumer responses and outcomes. This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing misleading advertisement cases and assessing their impact on consumer awareness and buying behaviour.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the concept and nature of misleading advertisements in India.

- To analyse the legal and regulatory framework governing misleading advertisements.
- To study selected ASCI and consumer court cases related to misleading advertising.
- To assess the impact of misleading advertisements on consumer awareness and buying behaviour.
- To understand how lack of awareness contributes to consumer vulnerability and how informed consumers respond differently to misleading advertisements.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms in protecting consumer interests and to increase consumer awareness.

4. Research Questions

- What constitutes misleading advertising under Indian law?
- How do misleading advertisements influence consumer buying behaviour?
- How effective are regulatory bodies such as ASCI and consumer courts in controlling misleading advertisements?
- How informed consumers behave to misleading advertisement?
- How by enhancing consumer awareness and promoting ethical television advertising practices effect consumer protection?

5. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the issue of misleading advertisements and consumer protection. Misleading advertisement broadly refers to any false or deceptive information presented by marketers that can distort consumers' choices and beliefs about a product or service. According to the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, an advertisement is misleading if it falsely describes a product/ service or misleads consumers regarding nature, quantity,

quality, or other characteristics. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that deceptive advertising undermines consumer trust and long-term brand credibility. According to Preston (1994), misleading advertisements often rely on ambiguity and omission rather than outright falsehoods, making regulation challenging. Vance Packard, in The Hidden Persuaders (1957), highlighted the psychological techniques used in advertising to manipulate consumer emotions and subconscious desires. His work laid the foundation for understanding how advertising can influence consumers beyond rational decision-making. Scholars such as Neil Postman (1985), in Amusing Ourselves to Death, have critiqued television as a medium that blends entertainment with commercial messaging, often prioritising attention over factual accuracy which inadvertently creates an environment ripe for misleading claims

In the Indian context, Singh and Bansal (2018) highlight the growing prevalence of misleading advertisements in healthcare and education sectors. Their study reveals that consumers often fail to verify claims due to lack of awareness and overreliance on advertisements. A study by the Advertising Standards Council of India (2022) indicates a rise in complaints related to misleading claims, particularly in television and digital advertising. Legal scholars such as Ramanujam (2020) argue that while the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides stronger enforcement powers, implementation remains inconsistent. Studies also indicate that consumer education and media literacy play a crucial role in reducing the impact of deceptive advertising. Richa Jhanwar and Dishita Khanddia in International Journal of Law, Management & Humanities. (2022) concluded that, a consumer should be aware of all facts and shouldn't be carried away with any information that has provided they should have the knowledge of all the facts regarding the product or service to avoid misleading. Studies specific to India have identified gaps in advertising regulation and enforcement. Researchers have noted that while the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides comprehensive provisions against misleading advertisements, particularly under Section 2(28),

awareness among consumers about their rights and redressal mechanisms remains limited. Similarly, self-regulatory bodies like ASCI have been active in identifying and flagging misleading ads, but their reliance on voluntary compliance from advertisers limits their enforcement power. The review reveals a gap in integrated studies combining legal analysis, case studies, and consumer awareness, which this paper seeks to address.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Research Design: The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is qualitative in nature and focuses on understanding patterns and implications of misleading advertisements through case studies. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how misleading television advertisements affect consumer awareness and buying behaviour in real-life situations.

6.2. Nature of Data: The study is based entirely on secondary data. Secondary data were collected from official reports of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), consumer court judgments, news articles, academic publications, and government sources. The case study method enables a detailed examination of instances where misleading television advertisements have been challenged by regulators or consumers, providing insights into how awareness influences consumer behaviour. The study particularly focuses on documented decisions where misleading claims have been identified and addressed by regulatory or legal authorities

6.3. Sources of Data: Research journals and books, ASCI reports and case summaries, Consumer court judgments, Government publications (CCPA, Ministry of Consumer Affairs), Newspapers and authentic online legal databases

6.4. Method of Analysis: Content analysis of advertisements, Case law analysis, Comparative legal analysis

7. Case Study Analysis

7.1. ASCI Case Examples (Misleading Television Ads):

7.1.1. Dettol Handwash "99.9% Virus Protection" Claim In 2020, ASCI upheld complaints against Dettol's television advertisement that claimed "99.9% protection against viruses," suggesting superior efficacy in preventing viral infection without adequate scientific validation. ASCI determined that such claims required substantiation from credible scientific evidence and directed corrective action. This case illustrates how unverified health claims in television ads can mislead consumers about product performance.

7.1.2. Lenskart "Free Glasses" Offer

In 2022, ASCI found a Lenskart TV campaign misleading because the claim of "free glasses" was conditional and coupled with hidden requirements and charges. Such promotions, when presented without clear qualifiers, can create false impressions in consumers' minds about the nature of the offer.

7.1.3. Healthcare and Cosmetic Claims

ASCI has repeatedly upheld complaints against ads that make exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims. For example, the advertisement for a diabetes treatment promising a "cure in 72 hours" was found to be false and grossly misleading by the ASCI Consumer Complaints Council.

7.1.4. Consumer Goods & Lifestyle Claims

Various television advertisements by brands like Tata Sky and Prestige Livestraw Water Purifier have been criticised for misrepresenting product benefits without factual backing, highlighting how everyday consumer products often feature claims that overstate performance.

In FY 2023–24, ASCI's annual report showed that 81% of complaints processed involved misleading claims, underscoring how widespread such issues are in Indian advertising, including television.

8.2. Consumer Court Case Examples:

8.2.1. FirstCry – "Drip Pricing" and Hidden Costs (2025)

The baby-products brand FirstCry was fined ₹2 lakh by the CCPA for misleading pricing tactics known as drip pricing. Here the initial price advertised did not include mandatory additional charges, misleading consumers about the true cost.

8.2.2. Patanjali Ayurved – Misleading Health Claims (2022–2024)

Patanjali faced long-running judicial scrutiny and a temporary ban on its commercials for making unsubstantiated health claims (such as curing diseases) and disparaging modern medicine. The Supreme Court of India intervened and imposed corrective measures (including public apologies and warnings).

8.2.3. Pan Masala Advertisement Case

In 2025, a District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Kota took up a case alleging that a pan masala television advertisement featuring celebrity endorsement by a well-known actor was misleading. The complainant argued that the product could not plausibly include expensive ingredients like saffron as claimed in the ad, given its low price point. The court ordered a forensic test of the celebrity's signature on legal documents and directed the actor to personally appear, signalling the seriousness of consumer allegations against misleading claims.

8.2.4. Rapido "Guaranteed Auto" Claim

The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) fined Rapido Rs 10 lakh for a misleading advertisement claiming "Guaranteed auto … or get Rs 50," which the authority found was not consistently deliverable. This demonstrates regulatory action against misleading service claims including those adapted for television and online promotion.

8.2.5. VLCC Instant Weight-Loss Claims

The CCPA also penalised VLCC Limited Rs 3 lakh for misleading advertisements promoting instant weight-loss technologies without adequate evidence. Regulatory fines serve as deterrence but also highlight how consumers are influenced by exaggerated claims about health and body image.

8.2.6. District Forum Fine for False Product Claims

A consumer forum ordered a Noida-based company to refund money and pay compensation to a couple misled by an advertised weight-loss product that failed to deliver results and caused side effects. The case exemplifies how misleading product claims can directly harm consumer health and finances.

These cases demonstrate recurring patterns of exaggeration, omission, and emotional appeal in misleading advertisements.

9. Discussion and Findings

The analysis of secondary data reveals several common themes:

9.1. Prevalence of Misleading Claims

Misleading claims remain ubiquitous in television advertising, ranging from exaggerated performance to unverified health benefits. ASCI's high percentage of upheld complaints (81% in 2023–24) indicates that a large proportion of television and other media advertisements fail to meet advertising standards.

9.2. Consumer Vulnerability and Awareness

Consumers with low levels of media literacy are more susceptible to misleading claims, particularly when advertisements feature emotional appeals, persuasive language, or celebrity endorsements. In contrast, consumers who recognise deceptive elements are more likely to seek redressal from ASCI or consumer court forums.

9.3. Role of Regulatory Bodies

Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies including ASCI, CCPA, and consumer courts play critical roles in identifying and correcting misleading television advertisements.

However, enforcement is often reactive rather than preventive, relying on complaints or monitoring to trigger action.

9.4. Impact on Buying Behaviour

Misleading television advertisements distort consumer expectations and can lead to impulsive purchases or dissatisfaction when product outcomes fail to match advertised claims. Cases involving health-related products show particularly high stakes, as consumers may experience not only financial loss but health risks.

So in short the analysis reveals that misleading advertisements significantly influence consumer buying behaviour, particularly among less informed consumers. Emotional appeal, celebrity endorsements, and visual persuasion play a major role in shaping consumer perception. Regulatory bodies like ASCI and consumer courts have taken corrective action, but enforcement challenges persist.

Consumer awareness emerges as a key factor in mitigating deceptive advertising. Educated and informed consumers are more likely to question claims and seek redressal mechanisms.

10. Conclusion

The study concludes that misleading television advertisements continue to exert a significant influence on consumer buying behaviour, particularly in cases where consumer awareness is limited. The case study analysis based on secondary data demonstrates that lack of awareness and media literacy increases consumer vulnerability to deceptive advertising practices.

While regulatory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, and self-regulatory bodies like ASCI play an important role in controlling misleading advertisements, their effectiveness is closely linked to informed and vigilant

consumers. Enhancing consumer education, promoting media literacy, and ensuring strict enforcement of advertising regulations are essential to protect consumer interests. The study emphasises the importance of ethical advertising practices and concludes that consumer awareness serves as a powerful tool in combating misleading television advertisements and fostering a transparent and responsible advertising environment.

10.1. Suggestions and Recommendations

It is evident that misleading television advertisements continue to influence consumer buying behaviour significantly, particularly among those with limited awareness and media literacy. While regulatory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, ASCI guidelines, and CCPA penalties form an important foundation for consumer rights protection, their effectiveness depends on the proactive participation of consumers and enhanced awareness of consumer rights and advertising standards. Strengthening consumer education, media literacy campaigns, and robust enforcement of advertising standards is essential to safeguard consumer interests in a media environment saturated with persuasive advertising.

The study underscores the need for continued monitoring of television advertisements and encourages consumers to be vigilant, informed, and empowered to hold advertisers accountable for misleading claims.

10.2. Recommendations:

- Strengthening enforcement of advertising regulations
- Promoting consumer education and media literacy
- Mandatory disclosure of evidence for advertising claims
- Accountability of celebrity endorsers
- Encouraging ethical advertising practices

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Artificial Intelligence, Algorithms, And Civic Discourse: How Social Media Algorithms Influence Political Conversations And Democratic Participation Among Young Users

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence has become deeply integrated into social media platforms and now plays a significant role in shaping public communication and political interaction. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X rely heavily on AI-driven recommendation systems that personalise content according to users' preferences, engagement patterns, and browsing behaviour. While these systems improve user experience and increase platform engagement, they also influence political awareness, democratic participation, and civic discourse among young users. This study examines the role of algorithmic amplification in shaping political conversations and democratic participation among social media users aged 18–30. The research explores how recommendation systems promote emotionally charged content, reinforce ideological echo chambers, and influence public opinion. The study further investigates how media literacy and awareness affect users' ability to critically engage with algorithmically curated political content.

The paper adopts a mixed-method research approach combining surveys, interviews, and digital diary observations. Secondary sources such as academic journals, policy reports, and platform studies are also used to support the analysis. The findings indicate that algorithms often prioritise sensational and emotionally engaging content over balanced and fact-based discussions, thereby contributing to political

polarisation and hostile online discourse. However, the study also finds that social media platforms can encourage political participation and civic engagement among digitally active youth. The research highlights the urgent need for stronger media literacy initiatives, ethical platform governance, and greater algorithmic transparency in order to ensure healthier democratic communication in the digital era.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Recommendation Algorithms, Civic Discourse, Political Communication, Social Media, Democratic Participation, Media Literacy.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence and algorithmic recommendation systems have transformed the modern digital communication environment. Social media platforms are no longer limited to functioning as spaces for interaction and entertainment; they now play a major role in influencing political opinions, public discussions, and democratic participation. Young people increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X for accessing news, discussing political issues, and participating in civic conversations. Recommendation algorithms operate by analysing user behaviour, including likes, comments, shares, viewing duration, and search patterns, in order to predict and recommend content that is most likely to attract engagement. While such personalisation improves user convenience and platform efficiency, it also creates concerns regarding selective exposure, echo chambers, misinformation, and ideological polarisation. In India, where internet penetration and smartphone usage have expanded rapidly in recent years, algorithmic influence on political communication has become especially significant. Social media platforms are now central to election campaigns, public mobilisation, online activism, and digital debates. The increasing dependence on AI-driven content curation raises important questions regarding democratic discourse, political trust, and citizens' ability to access diverse viewpoints.

The influence of algorithms extends beyond information distribution. Algorithms actively shape what users see, how frequently they see it, and which narratives become dominant online. As a result, public discourse is increasingly mediated through automated systems that prioritise engagement over deliberative quality. Emotionally charged and controversial content often receives greater visibility because it generates stronger user interaction. This growing influence of AI on civic communication has created a need to critically examine the relationship between algorithmic systems, political behaviour, and democratic participation.

2. The Research Problem

In the contemporary digital environment, social media algorithms significantly influence the visibility and circulation of political content. Recommendation systems are designed to maximise user engagement by promoting content that generates emotional reactions, longer viewing time, and repeated interaction. Although such systems increase platform activity, they also contribute to political polarisation, misinformation, and fragmented civic discourse. Young users are particularly vulnerable to algorithmic influence because social media forms a major part of their daily communication practices. Continuous exposure to ideologically similar content may limit access to alternative viewpoints and reinforce existing beliefs. This creates digital echo chambers where users engage primarily with perspectives that align with their opinions. The problem becomes more critical during elections and politically sensitive events when emotionally driven narratives, misinformation, and sensational content spread rapidly through algorithmic amplification. Despite growing concerns regarding algorithmic influence, many users remain unaware of how recommendation systems shape their online experiences. A significant gap therefore exists between algorithmic operation and public understanding. There is limited awareness regarding how AI-driven systems influence political perception, civic engagement, and democratic participation. The present study seeks to examine how recommendation algorithms shape civic discourse among

young social media users and how media literacy may reduce the negative effects of algorithmic influence.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine how AI-driven algorithms influence civic discourse among young social media users.
- To analyse the role of recommendation systems in shaping political opinions and democratic participation.
- To study how emotionally amplified content contributes to online polarisation and hostility.
- To understand the relationship between media literacy and algorithmic awareness.
- To compare the influence of different social media platforms on political communication.
- To evaluate the broader implications of algorithmic systems on democratic communication in India.

4. Research Questions

- How do recommendation algorithms affect exposure to political content among young users?
- Do AI-driven algorithms contribute to political polarisation and echo chambers?
- How does media literacy influence awareness of algorithmic manipulation?
- What role do social media platforms play in shaping civic participation and political trust?
- How does emotionally amplified content affect the quality of online civic discourse?

5. Literature Review

Several scholars have examined the growing relationship between artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, and political communication. Existing studies suggest that

recommendation systems influence not only what people consume online but also how they think, interact, and participate in democratic processes.

5.1. Eli Pariser (2011), in The Filter Bubble, argued that personalised algorithms reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints and create isolated informational environments. According to Pariser, users are increasingly trapped within digital spaces where they encounter only content that aligns with their beliefs and preferences.

5.2. Cass Sunstein (2017), in #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of social media, explained that online echo chambers intensify political extremism and weaken democratic deliberation. He argued that exposure to opposing viewpoints is essential for healthy democratic communication.

5.3. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) described algorithms as modern digital gatekeepers that shape visibility and control public attention. Unlike traditional media editors, algorithmic systems operate automatically and remain largely invisible to users, making their influence difficult to detect.

5.4. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) examined how social media platforms amplify emotionally engaging content because outrage and sensationalism generate stronger engagement metrics. Her work demonstrates how algorithms reward emotional intensity rather than factual accuracy.

5.5. Yochai Benkler (2006), through the concept of the networked public sphere, highlighted how digital platforms allow individuals to participate in decentralised political communication. However, algorithmic mediation often fragments public discourse into ideologically homogeneous communities.

In the Indian context, studies on political communication and social media have highlighted the growing influence of WhatsApp forwards, political memes, and viral narratives in shaping public opinion. Researchers have argued that low media literacy and rapid digital expansion contribute to the spread of misinformation and communal narratives. Existing

literature indicates that algorithms can simultaneously encourage civic participation while also reducing the quality of democratic discourse. However, there remains limited research focusing specifically on Indian youth and their experiences with algorithmic influence across multiple social media platforms.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Research Design:

The study adopts a mixed-method research design combining descriptive, analytical, and

interpretative approaches. The research includes both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the broader impact of recommendation algorithms on civic discourse.

6.2. Nature of Data:

The study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected through online surveys, interviews, and digital diary observations involving young social media users aged 18–30. Secondary data are collected from academic journals, books, policy documents, government reports, platform studies, and media research publications.

6.3. Sources of Data:

- Academic journals and books
- Research reports on AI and political communication
- Government publications and policy documents
- Social media platform studies
- Interviews and digital diary observations
- Online surveys among young users

6.4. Method of Analysis:

- Statistical analysis of survey responses
- Thematic analysis of interviews and digital diaries

- Comparative platform analysis
- Interpretative analysis of algorithmic influence on political behaviour

7. Expected Findings

The study expects to find that recommendation algorithms significantly influence the nature and quality of civic discourse among young social media users. The research anticipates that users exposed to highly personalised political content will experience lower exposure diversity and greater ideological reinforcement. Emotionally charged and sensational content is expected to generate higher engagement while reducing the quality of rational political discussion. The findings are also likely to demonstrate that media literacy and algorithmic awareness reduce susceptibility to misinformation and echo chamber effects. Users who understand how recommendation systems operate may be more likely to seek diverse viewpoints and critically evaluate online political content. Platform-specific differences are also expected. WhatsApp and X may display greater levels of political hostility and misinformation due to rapid sharing mechanisms, while Instagram and YouTube may rely more heavily on visual emotional engagement. The study explores how artificial intelligence-driven recommendation systems are influencing civic discourse, political communication, and democratic participation among young social media users. In today's digital age, social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X have become important spaces where people access news, discuss politics, express opinions, and participate in public conversations. Young users, in particular, spend a significant amount of time on these platforms, making them highly dependent on algorithmically curated information. Since most online content is filtered and recommended through AI systems, algorithms now play an important role in shaping how individuals understand politics and engage with democratic discussions. The study expects to find that recommendation algorithms strongly influence the type of political content young users consume and how they interact

with it. Social media platforms continuously track user behaviour, including likes, comments, shares, viewing history, and search activity, in order to personalise content feeds. As a result, users are often exposed to information that matches their interests, opinions, and previous online behaviour. While this personalisation improves convenience and keeps users engaged, it can also reduce exposure to diverse political perspectives. One of the key expected findings of the study is that users who consume highly personalised political content are more likely to encounter viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs. Algorithms tend to recommend content similar to what users have already interacted with, creating a repetitive information environment. Over time, this may lead to the formation of digital echo chambers where individuals mainly engage with opinions that support their own political views. Such environments limit balanced political discussions and reduce opportunities for users to encounter alternative perspectives.

The study also anticipates that emotionally charged and sensational political content will receive greater engagement and visibility on social media platforms. Most recommendation systems are designed to maximise user engagement because engagement directly benefits platform growth and advertising revenue. Content that creates strong emotional reactions such as anger, fear, outrage, or excitement usually attracts more likes, comments, shares, and watch time. As a result, algorithms are more likely to promote sensational political narratives than calm, fact-based, or policy-oriented discussions. This trend may negatively affect the quality of civic discourse online. Political discussions on social media often become emotional and confrontational rather than rational and informative. Instead of encouraging thoughtful democratic debate, platforms may unintentionally reward content that creates division and controversy. The study therefore expects to find that social media algorithms contribute to political polarisation by amplifying emotionally engaging content over balanced communication.

Another important finding likely to emerge from the study is the rapid spread of misinformation through algorithmic amplification. Recommendation systems are primarily designed to identify engaging content rather than verify factual accuracy. Because of this, misleading political information, edited visuals, conspiracy theories, and manipulative narratives can spread quickly if they generate strong audience reactions. During elections, protests, or politically sensitive events, such misinformation may significantly influence public perception and social behaviour. Young users who are unaware of how recommendation systems operate may unknowingly consume and share misleading information without verification. Continuous exposure to such content can create confusion, distrust, and ideological bias. The study expects to show that users with lower levels of media literacy are more vulnerable to manipulation through algorithmically promoted misinformation. At the same time, the research also recognises that social media platforms can positively contribute to civic engagement and political participation. Many young users rely on digital platforms to stay informed about political issues, participate in awareness campaigns, support social movements, and express their opinions publicly. Online activism, digital discussions, and awareness campaigns have created opportunities for young people to become more politically involved than before. Social media has made political participation more accessible, interactive, and immediate for digitally connected youth. The study further expects to identify differences in how various platforms influence political communication. WhatsApp and X are likely to show higher levels of political hostility, misinformation, and ideological conflict because of their rapid-sharing structures and real-time communication systems. WhatsApp forwards and group messages often circulate political narratives quickly without proper verification, while X encourages immediate reactions and confrontational public debates. In contrast, Instagram and YouTube are expected to rely more heavily on visual and emotional forms of engagement. Political communication on these platforms often appears through reels, memes, influencer commentary, short-form

videos, and visual storytelling. As a result, political issues are sometimes presented in simplified and emotionally appealing ways that prioritise engagement over detailed discussion or factual depth.

One of the most important findings expected from the study is the role of media literacy and algorithmic awareness in reducing the harmful effects of recommendation systems. Users who understand how algorithms function are more likely to critically evaluate political content, verify information from multiple sources, and actively seek diverse opinions. Such users are less likely to accept viral content without questioning its accuracy or intention. Media literacy therefore appears to act as a protective factor against misinformation, manipulation, and ideological isolation. The study also suggests that awareness regarding algorithmic influence can encourage healthier online behaviour. Individuals who understand that their feeds are curated according to engagement patterns may become more conscious of the information they consume and share. This awareness can help users avoid passive consumption and encourage more responsible digital participation. Overall, the findings of the study indicate that the influence of AI-driven recommendation systems on democratic communication is both complex and significant. Algorithms have the ability to increase political awareness and encourage participation, but they can also contribute to misinformation, political hostility, and polarisation if engagement becomes the primary focus of platform design. The impact of recommendation systems therefore depends not only on technology itself but also on user awareness, platform responsibility, digital literacy, and ethical governance.

The study ultimately concludes that protecting democratic discourse in the digital era requires a balanced approach that combines technological innovation with social responsibility. Greater transparency regarding algorithmic systems, stronger platform accountability, and widespread media literacy initiatives are necessary to create healthier online public spaces. Informed digital citizens and ethically governed

AI systems will play a crucial role in ensuring that social media platforms strengthen rather than weaken democratic communication in the future.

8. Discussion and Findings

The analysis suggests that AI-driven algorithms play a powerful role in shaping democratic communication and public discourse. Recommendation systems influence which political narratives gain visibility and how frequently users encounter specific viewpoints. One of the key findings of the study is that emotionally amplified political content receives greater algorithmic visibility because it generates stronger engagement metrics such as comments, shares, and watch time. As a result, sensational narratives often dominate online political conversations.

The study also finds that algorithmic personalisation contributes to the formation of ideological echo chambers where users repeatedly encounter similar viewpoints. Such environments reduce exposure to balanced political perspectives and intensify political polarisation. At the same time, the research demonstrates that social media platforms can encourage civic engagement by increasing political awareness and participation among digitally active youth. Online campaigns, activism, and public debates allow young users to engage more directly with political issues. Media literacy emerges as a critical factor in reducing the harmful effects of algorithmic manipulation. Users with higher awareness of platform algorithms are more likely to question political content, verify information, and seek alternative perspectives. The findings therefore suggest that the impact of algorithms on democratic communication is complex and shaped by user awareness, platform governance, and digital literacy.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that artificial intelligence and recommendation algorithms have become influential forces in shaping civic discourse and democratic participation in the

digital era. Social media platforms actively influence political communication by controlling the visibility and circulation of information. While algorithmic systems can increase political participation and public engagement, they also contribute to echo chambers, misinformation, ideological polarisation, and hostile online discourse. The dominance of engagement-driven content prioritisation often weakens the quality of rational democratic discussion. The study emphasises that media literacy and algorithmic awareness are essential for protecting democratic communication. Educated and informed users are more capable of critically analysing online political content and resisting manipulative narratives. The research further highlights the need for ethical platform governance, greater transparency regarding recommendation systems, and stronger digital literacy initiatives. Ensuring a healthy democratic environment in the digital age requires a balance between technological innovation and social responsibility.

9.1. Suggestions and Recommendations

The study highlights the urgent need for responsible algorithmic governance and stronger digital literacy initiatives in order to improve civic discourse in online spaces.

Recommendations:

- Greater transparency regarding recommendation algorithms and content moderation systems
- Strengthening media literacy and digital citizenship education among young users
- Encouraging platforms to prioritise factual and diverse political content
- Developing stronger policies against misinformation and manipulative political campaigns
- Increasing public awareness regarding algorithmic influence and data-driven personalisation
- Promoting ethical AI practices that support democratic communication and informed public debate

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