The Impact of Social Media on Students' Awareness and Engagement with Social Issues

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author DA designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol, and drafted the initial manuscript. Author GSK provided guidance, supervised the research project, and reviewed the manuscript. Author BA handled formatting and editing after reviewing the manuscript. Authors IM and KS provided additional insights. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study aimed to investigate the impact of social media on university students' awareness and engagement with social issues.
Study Design: The study followed a cross-sectional study design.

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Place and Duration of Study: The study was conducted at G B Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand, India, over a period of three months from March 2024 to June 2024.

Methodology: A convenience sampling technique was used to select 100 students, predominantly male (74.00%), mostly aged 18-24 years (56.00%), with the majority from the College of Agriculture (75.00%). Data were collected using a structured Google form survey assessing social media usage, awareness of social issues, and engagement behaviors. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data.

Results: The study found that social media significantly enhances awareness of social issues, with (54.00%) of respondents rating their awareness as high after exposure, compared to (31.00%) before social media exposure. Engagement levels were moderate, with (58.00%) of students participating in online campaigns and (46.00%) moderately likely to engage in social issues after exposure. Key actions taken included sharing posts (53.00%), volunteering (45.00%), attending events and donating (42.00%), and using hashtags (33.00%).

Conclusion: The results demonstrate that social media is a powerful tool for enhancing awareness and encouraging civic engagement among university students, suggesting its potential for driving meaningful social change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a pervasive and influential component of daily life in this digital age, particularly among university students [1]. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok are channels for personal interaction and entertainment and powerful tools for disseminating information and mobilizing social change [2,3,4]. With the rapid proliferation of social media, the face of communication has drastically changed, and access to events happening across the world in real-time is facilitated. Many scholars, educators, and policymakers have shown interest in how this may affect awareness and engagement in issues happening in society [5].

University students are usually one of the forerunners when it comes to technology adoption and social movements; hence, this demographic group presents a unique case of study in understanding the influence of social media [6]. These students are frequently exposed to a myriad of social issues through their digital networks, ranging from climate change and racial justice to mental health awareness and gender equality [7,8].

It is at this juncture that understanding how social media influences their awareness and subsequent engagement of these issues develops appropriate strategies for leveraging these platforms effectively for positive social change [9].

While social media has been widely embraced, more empirical evidence is required to detail its specific impacts on awareness and engagement behaviours for university students [10]. Past research has also highlighted that the nature of social media is both catalysing awareness and potentially problematic in terms of misinformation and echo chambers [4].

In this regard, the current study aimed to add to this growing body of literature with an investigation into how social media shapes university students' awareness and participation in various social causes [11]. The findings from this study will indicate how social media shapes the perception and mobilization to action on social issues among students. The information will be important in devising strategies that mobilize the forces of social media to nurture civic engagement and create effective social change at the university level and beyond.

This study aims to explore the most frequently used social media platforms among students, the types of content they engage with, how often they encounter social issues on these platforms, and how this exposure enhances their awareness and motivates action. The objectives include investigating students' awareness of social issues due to social media exposure and examining how social media influences their engagement and participation in these issues. Despite the pervasive use of social media, more empirical research is needed to clarify its specific impacts on the awareness and engagement behaviours of university students. Previous studies have noted the dual role of social media as a catalyst for awareness and as a source of challenges like misinformation and echo

chambers [12]. This research seeks to add to this growing body of knowledge by analysing how social media influences university students' awareness and engagement with social issues. The findings will offer insights into the role of social media in shaping students' perceptions and actions on social issues, which is crucial for developing strategies that leverage social media to promote civic engagement and drive meaningful social change within university communities and beyond.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted amongst students at G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand, India. The present paper advocates the study of the effect of social media on awareness and engagement about social issues. A convenience sampling method has been used here given the easy availability of participants at the moment, willingness, and time constraints. The present survey has been responded to by a total of 100 respondents.

A structured Google form survey method of data collection was adopted. The plans were to make the survey concise and easy to understand, fast to complete. Besides, demographic data is also collected at the beginning of the survey. In the survey, three major parts can be differentiated: usage of social media, awareness about social issues, and finally, engagement and participation in social issues. All demographic variables that were collected included age, gender, college, and degree program to ensure that the questionnaire covers representative diversity in the population of students. The respondents were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

2.1 Social Media Usage

Items in this section included the frequency and type of social media platform usage, average time spent on the platforms daily, and types of content one engaged with. For example, the participants were asked to choose all the following platforms they use: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and other social media; they were supposed to estimate their daily usage: less than 01 hours, from 01-02 hours, from 03-04 hours, and more than 04 hours. In this respect, it has also been asked what kind of content the user mostly sees: news, entertainment, educational, social issues, and others to be specified.

2.2 Awareness of Social Issues

They were asked about the frequency with which they came across various social issues on social media. Answering categories were daily, weekly, monthly, rarely, and never. It was then followed by ticking the social issues from which they have become more aware because of social media: climate change, racial justice, gender equality, mental health awareness, and others (please specify). They will be asked to rate their awareness of the social issue before and postexposure on a 1 to 5 ordinal scale from Not aware to fully aware.

2.3 Engagement and Participation

This was necessary to gauge to what extent participants can relate or involve themselves in social issues influenced by social media. The questions included whether they joined an online campaign or movement for a social issue 'yes/no', the probability of them getting involved in social issues after seeing them on their social media rated from 01-05, and what they did because of social media such as attending events, volunteering, donating, sharing posts, using hashtags, other actions.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the frequency and types of using social media, the level of awareness, and engagement in social issues, and the influence of demographic variables. Cross-tabulation and frequency distribution determined the patterns and correlations between the use of social media and changes in awareness and engagement. The present study also sought to examine how social media influences students' perception and involvement in social concerns, outlining major trends and further areas of research. However, the author acknowledges the study's limitations due to time constraints, which may have impacted the depth and breadth of the data collected.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 also provides a reasonable idea of the distribution of our respondents regarding age, gender, college affiliations, and degree programs. It can be elicited from the table that 56.00 per cent of the total respondents come

within the age bracket of 18 to 24 years and the predominant gender in this category is male, constituting 74.00 per cent. By 75.00 per cent, most of our respondents were from the College of Agriculture, while the most represented degree program was a Master of Science at 51 percent, followed by a Doctor of Philosophy at 30.00 per cent.
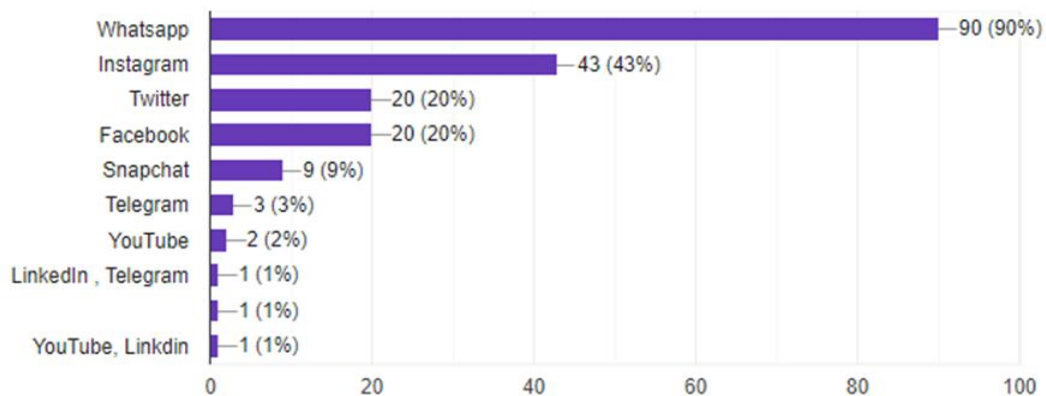
3.2 Social Media Platform Usage

The respondents were asked to mark all social media that they use more often than others. Sample answers are given in Fig. 1 as a bar chart. WhatsApp is the first in the list of most frequent platforms: 90.00% of the respondents marked WhatsApp among other types of social media which they use very frequently. That means almost the whole majority of the surveyed informants apply WhatsApp for communication. 43.00% of the participants use Instagram; hence, this is the second largest social portal after Facebook for socializing and transferring content and learning [13]. Further, 20.00% of the respondents each use Twitter and Facebook.

That means for other activities, these two socials are almost equally chosen by the participants. As for Snapchat, 09.00% of the respondents go with it. This relatively lower usage, compared to WhatsApp and Instagram, might reflect its appeal to a certain user demographic. The results were somewhat in line with that of data provided by Statista on," Most popular social networks as of April 2024, by number of monthly active users"[14].

Also, (03.00%) use Telegram, which may be a little more focused user base, probably because of its emphasis on privacy and security features. Lastly, (02.00%) of the survey participants reported frequent usage of YouTube. This may be relatively low because YouTube is more of a video-sharing platform than a social network. Apart from this, only 1 per cent are using platforms like LinkedIn, Telegram, and even combinations like YouTube and LinkedIn. This would, therefore, imply that the adopted digital behaviour is rather heterogeneous among the respondents. The results aligned somewhat with the study of Chaffey, D. [15].

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents (n=100)

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-24	56	56.00%
	25 and above	45	45.00%
Gender	Male	74	74.00%
	Female	26	26.00%
	Other	00	00.00%
College	College of Agriculture	75	75.00%
	College of Basic Sciences and Humanities	21	21.00%
	College of Community Science	04	04.00%
Degree Programme	Bachelor of Science	19	17.00%
	Master of Science	33	51.00%
	Doctor of Philosophy	42	30.00%
	Agri-business Management	06	02.00%

Fig. 1. Social media platform usage by the respondents

3.3 Time Spent by the Respondents on Social Media

Regarding daily consumption of time on social media, the majority of the participants reported 01-02 hours/day, followed by (28.00%) reporting 03-04 hours/day, (13.00%) more than 04 hours/day, and finally, only (10.00%) of the respondents reported spending less than one hour daily using social media, as depicted below.

3.4 Type of Content the Respondents Seek through Social Media

For example, respondents reported that they seek through social media mainly educational content, (72.00%), which is unsurprising as all the respondents were students. This is followed by seeking entertainment content 69.00 per cent of the time, news 62.00 per cent of the time, and social issues content 57.00 per cent of the time as in Fig. 3.

3.5 Awareness of Social Issues

On the issue of awareness about social issues, 57.00 per cent of the respondents reported coming across posts related to social issues on social media daily, followed by 22.00 per cent who reported encountering such posts every week, 09.00 per cent monthly, and 12.00 per cent rarely. Further, when asked about what social issues they have become more aware of through social media, responses mentioned climate change 75.00 per cent, followed by mental health awareness – (60.00%,) gender equality – (46.00%), racial justice – (39.00%) and 08.00 per cent mentioned other social issues like food & nutrition, political issues, population control, unemployment, calamities, international issues, etc. as shown below.
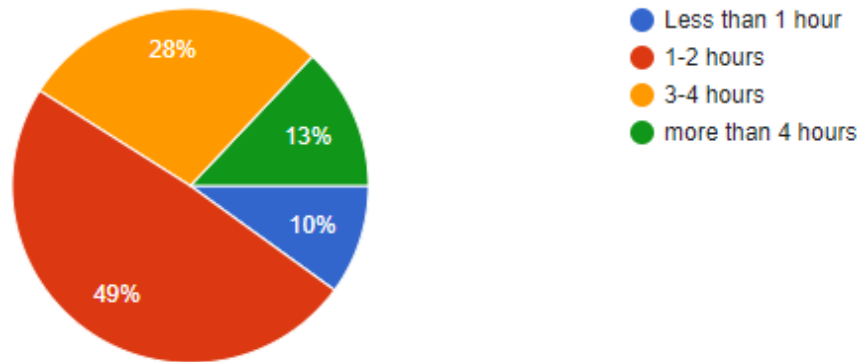

Fig. 2. Time spent by the respondents on social media (n=100)
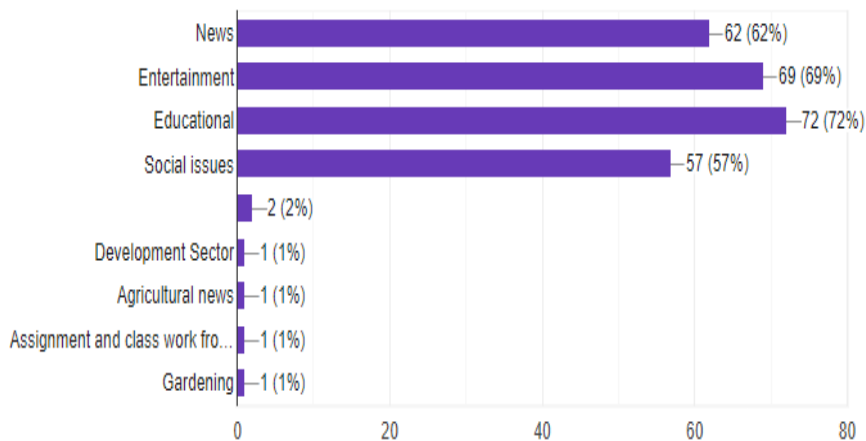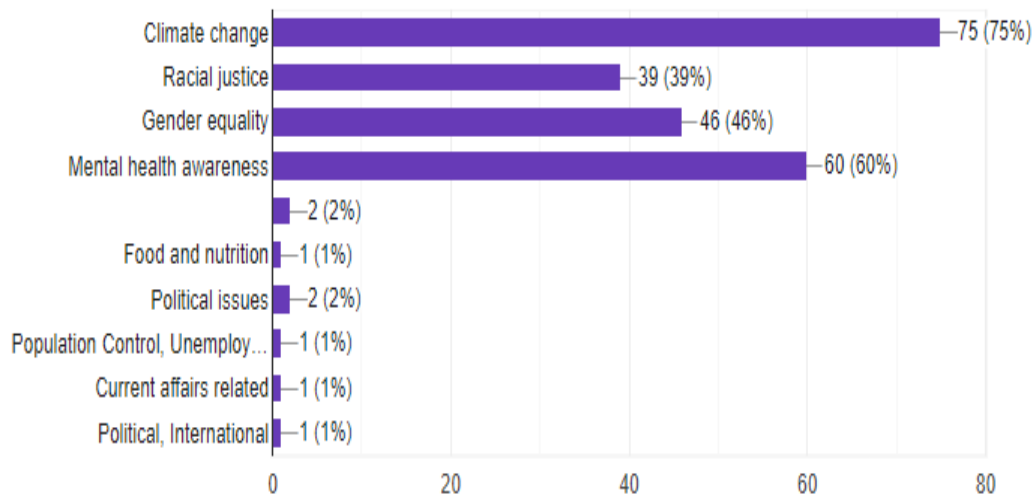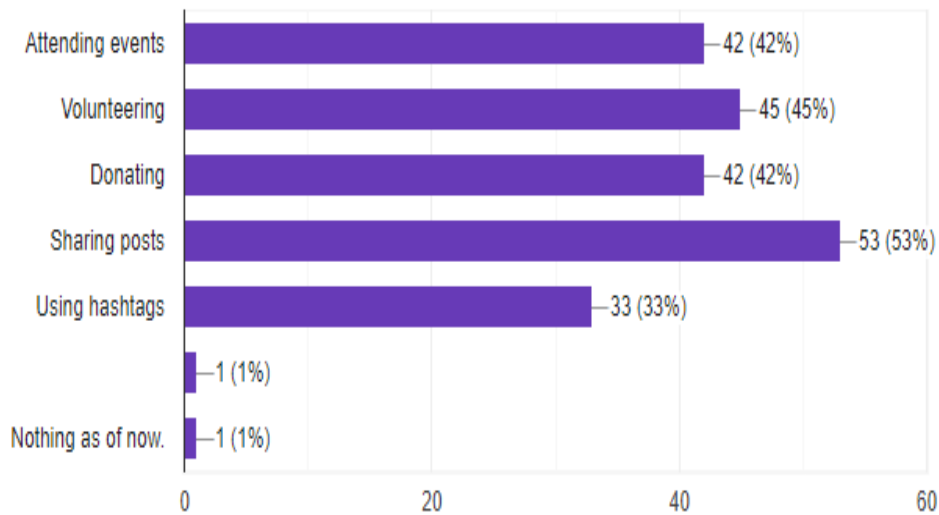

Fig. 3. Type of content the respondents seek through social media

Fig. 4. Social issues respondents come across through social media

Fig. 5. Actions taken by respondents to engage in social issues

The extent of awareness of the responding candidates was sought on a scale of 1 to 5 both before and after exposure or following the social media, and the results were as under:

➢ High Awareness 5/5 and 4/5: In this regard, 54.00 percent rated their levels of awareness as 4 or 5 after exposure to social media, while this was 31.00 percent before the exposure.
➢ Moderate Awareness - rated 3/5 by 41.00 per cent of the subjects after social media

exposure, whereas it was 30.00 per cent before the exposure itself.
➢ Low Awareness [2/5 and 1/5]: The respondents rated their awareness level as 3 by 16.00% after social media exposure, whereas before the exposure was rated by 28.00%.

One can notice a higher awareness and, in general, maintenance or improvement of the level of awareness among users. The research findings underline the impactful role of social

media in shaping and enriching public awareness of diverse topics. The exposure to varied information through social media platforms tends to contribute positively toward the overall levels of awareness among users, although this may be different depending on the initial levels of awareness.

3.6 Engagement and Participation

Results showed that there was a close difference between the respondents who participated in any online campaign or movement about social issues, comprising (58.00%), against (42.00%) of those not participating. The results further indicated that 46.00 per cent of the respondents are somewhat likely to participate in social issues after seeing them on social media. This was followed by 32.00 per cent of the respondents being highly likely to engage, while 10.00 per cent showed low interest in the engagement of social issues.

Here 53.00 per cent of respondents reported sharing posts to increase awareness and strengthen the online campaign, followed by 45.00 per cent stating volunteering for the social cause, followed by events related to the issue with 42.00 per cent each, as shown in Fig. 5. Further, 33.00 per cent responses talked about trending the social issue on social media using hashtags so that everyone may notice it and therefore, help in the situation. The findings are in agreement with the studies of [3,16,17,7].

4. CONCLUSION

The findings from the study of experienced digital networks show that students are influenced towards making changes in society through social media and are quite engaged in this process, thus meaning that new network applications serve as strong instruments for youth activism. Social networks have proved to be quite effective not only in terms of information sharing but also in engaging active participation in various social issues. What is more, considering that a substantial share of students shares or volunteer in different activities, it can be regarded as a means of raising awareness and calling for some form of action on social media. This is evident in many stories and testimonies of how youths have taken initiatives independently through online campaigns, where they took part in clean-up events, protests, and in the chase of their ideas to empower the community [13]. These platforms enable students to get in contact with like-minded friends, share necessary information and campaigns, and establish groups across several geographical contexts. It is for this reason that these means should be supported and integrated into education models and even public awareness campaigns so that maximum benefit will be derived by the youths. The more useful social media has proved for these purposes, the prudent integration of social media in such plans for educating the citizens and mobilizing them.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Authors hereby declare that no generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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