



Social Media Influence on Youth Behavior and Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The social media has contributed very significantly in the identity, communication, and even social interaction of the youths in the online generation. It is a source of entertainment and socialization, as well as it can be applied as the medium of political education, civic activism mobilization, and social change. The discussion in the paper will be covering a complicated role of social media in shaping the behavior and civic engagement of youths. It discusses not only the positive effects (increased political engagement, understanding of social problems, and connectedness of the whole world) but also the adverse effects (misinformation, cyberbullying, social isolation, and performative activism). Based on the psychological, sociological, and communication theories, this paper highlights the two-sidedness of social media, which is a place of empowerment and manipulation. The results underscore the fact that social media is potentially democratic and socially responsible when well instructed in terms of education, digital literacy, and responsible media behavior.

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Introduction

The digital age has brought about the social media as a revolution of how youths experience, behave, and interact all over the world. Facebook, Instagram, X (previously called Twitter), Tik Tok and YouTube have become the main means through which young people interact, share their views and engage in the social discussion (Pew Research Center, 2023). These platforms are not only accessible but also immediate, enabling the youth to not only disseminate information but also to actively create content, disseminate views, and organize group activity. In the last ten years, social media has enabled youth activism all over the world, including the phenomena of the past decade: the hash tags of FridayForFuture, BlackLivesMatter, and MeToo, which shows how a network on the Internet can shape the overall opinion and even policy discussions. The sites have offered never before seen chances of socializing politically, engaging in civic affairs, and cultural exposure, and young people can be involved in social change processes across geographical borders (Loader et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015).

Although these benefits exist, the impact of social media on the behavior of the young people is not rather positive. Although it can be useful in creating awareness and involvement, it can also lead to misinformation, echo-chamber, and performative activism, which can otherwise be referred to as slacktivism, in which online action does not lead to offline action (Morozov, 2009; Lentini and Walton, 2017). Psychological and social consequences are also considerable, and studies have indicated that extensive social media usage is related to anxiety, depression, decreased attention, and social isolation among the younger generation (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge and Campbell, 2018). These rank-based algorithms that value engaging content often give higher priority to sensationalism rather than being accurate and this may lead to the distortion of perceptions of social problems and politics. More

than that, social media outlets tend to offer edited and unrealistic images of lives, actions, and success, which affect self-esteem, peer comparison, and behavioral standards among teens and young adults (Valkenburg et al., 2017).

Social media may impact civic participation in a dual way according to research. On the one hand, it equips young people with the knowledge, resources and contacts to engage in social activism, political campaigns and community projects. It allows spreading information quickly, organizing activities, and forming the collective action, allowing the youth to share their political views and campaigns to change the situation in society (Theocharis et al., 2015; Boulianne, 2020). Conversely, the excessive use of digital channels to engage with people could decrease the traditional participation tools, including volunteering, participating in town hall meetings, or even organizing an offline protest. This poses significant concerns regarding the level of civic activity that social media platforms enable or whether online platforms are promoting the active citizenship or the symbolic nature of engagement (Loader and Mercea, 2011).

The social media is also significant regarding the aspect of its education. Online resources can be used to increase media literacy, critical thinking, and civic knowledge in young people when properly incorporated into educational practices (Livingstone et al., 2017). Schools and universities can use social media to pursue participatory learning, awareness and joint works that will foster responsible citizenship. Nevertheless, biased narratives, strengthening stereotypes, and normalizing harmful behavior are also spread through the same platforms unless it is supported by digital literacy education (Buckingham, 2013). The responsible use and ethical concerns are thus at the core of the entire issue of the widespread effect of social media on youth.

The importance of researching the impact of the social media is that it is everywhere and dictates the behavior of the youth, their political consciousness, and social responsibility. Social media is an essential communication device, a kind of self-expression, and mobilization in the regions where high youth rates are recorded, including South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (UNICEF, 2021). The insight into the character of online interaction, changes in psychology and behavior, and the opportunities of civic engagement is the key to educators, policymakers, and social scientists. It can guide the making of policies in order to promote positive online behavior, reduce the negative impacts and use the strength of online platforms to promote social responsibility and engagement in the community.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory and other theoretical perspectives highlights the fact that individuals are active participants in the media in an attempt to fulfil the desire to seek information, entertainment and socialisation (Katz et al., 1973). Based on this perspective, one can explain the appeal of social media sites to young people and how the social media sites can fulfill psychological, cognitive and social needs. Simultaneously, young individuals observing the social media, imitating and internalizing the behaviour that they observe on the social media are explained by the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which shapes the online and offline behaviour. Also, Digital Citizenship models are aimed at the construction of informed and ethical online behaviours, and the models are concerned with the interconnectivity between the virtual engagement and social responsibility in the real world (Ribble, 2015). To sum up, social media is a two-sided phenomenon, which provides young people with transformational opportunities to engage in social activities and poses formidable psychological, social, and civic problems. The extensive application of it requires a sophisticated interpretation of the empowering as well as the potentially harmful impacts on the behavior, identity development, and civic participation of young people. With the further development of social media, it becomes necessary to study the effects of social media on young populations and develop strategies to maximize its positive effects, reduce the negative ones, and create informed, responsible, and active citizens regarding digital media (Best et al., 2014; Ito et al., 2020). The given research endeavors to investigate these complex impacts, which will help understand the contribution of social media to the modern youth influence and their involvement in civic and social activities.

Literature Review

Social media has become a central determinant of how youths behave, communicate and participate in civic affairs over the last 10 years. The advantages of this technology, psychological and sociopolitical aspects of these platforms have been studied widely by academics, and their dual role in empowering and influencing youth has been emphasized. The social media provides faster sharing of information and young people are able to get the news, share their views and engage in discussion as well as debating issues with unprecedented immediacy (boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is interactive hence enables two way communication unlike traditional media which promotes active participation of the user and creation of contents (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The ability to share, comment and collaborate enables young people to shape social discourses, and interact with societies outside of the physical space, thereby changing conventional channels of civic participation (Boulianne, 2015).

Studies have shown that social media sites will serve as identity shaping and social learning sites in young people. Teenagers and young adults often practice impression management and self-presentation, compare themselves with others, and discuss their issues on these sites, which have a significant effect on their self-image, social behavior, and decision-making (Valkenburg et al., 2017; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). What is viewed over the internet such as political rhetoric to images of a life style influence the attitude, standards, and expectations of behavior. Research by Best et al. (2014) opines that the exposure to social media is not

only informative to the youths regarding what is happening in the world but also a place where values, beliefs, and social identity are negotiated. Social media therefore acts as reflective and projective space, where youths get to observe social norms and in the process play an active role in the creation of peer and community identities.

Social media has been the primary concern of modern studies related to civic engagement. Researchers have noted that social networks like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have opened up easy ways through which young people can engage in political activities, volunteer, and be social activists (Loader et al., 2014; Theocharis et al., 2015). Digital networks provide an opportunity to organize protests, awareness campaigns, and community work because they allow organizing participants and mobilizing them in an extremely short period of time. The studies show that online civic participation can make political effectiveness, social consciousness, and involvement in real life activities more effective in case it is facilitated by institutional and educational infrastructure (Boulianne, 2020). Besides, social media analytics enables young activists to monitor the spread and effectiveness of their movements, which improves the planning of campaigns and promotes the accountability of digital activism (Jungherr, 2016).

However, in the literature, other issues and drawbacks, which are associated with the application of social media, are also present. Content curating algorithm, misinformation, and echo chamber algorithms can mislead the perceptions and fuel the already existing biases (Morozov, 2009; Tandoc et al., 2018). There is no better prey than youth, as less experienced and not developed to distinguish truth and lies, they can be misled by information with inaccurate content, which can lead to wrong decisions and polarization (Guess et al., 2019). Moreover, the literature states that excess use of social media may contribute to mental health problems, namely, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, which indirectly affect civic turnout and social engagement (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge and Campbell, 2018). Such findings point to the multidimensional interplay of psychological health, internet behaviors and social accountability amid the youths.

Several researchers have examined the role of social media in the improvement of positive and negative behaviors. On a positive note, platforms assist in learning, skill development, and cooperative participation on a social cause (Ito et al., 2020). The skills that young people could master in the case of online civic campaigns are leadership, organizational, and communications, which can be applied to social competence (Livingstone et al., 2017). Conversely, the literature also demonstrates the risks of such a performative type of activism or a form of slacktivism, where the online participation may turn out to be vacuous and never translate into a physical action (Morozov, 2009; Lentini and Walton, 2017). This puts the validity, richness and sustainability of online civic engagement among the young population that calls the necessity to have supporting interventions as channels between the digital and the offline participation.

Much research has been done on the psychological theories of the use of social media. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is based on people active seeking media in order to meet cognitive, affective, personal, and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). This model will be useful in understanding why young people resort to social media as a source of information, social bond, and self-expression. Social Learning Theory also explains the ways in which the young generations learn and copy the behaviors that they see online and then integrate them into their lives (Bandura, 1977). These theories indicate that exposure to civic oriented materials and peer modeling can inculcate political knowledge, social awareness and participation behaviors in civic settings. At the same time, Digital Citizenship models highlight the importance of responsible online behavior, ethical interactions, and competency development as the crucial aspect of critical navigation of digital spaces (Ribble, 2015).

It is also found in empirical research that there are differences in the degree to which social media affects the demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic settings. The young people in urban areas tend to be more connected to high-speed internet connections, mobile phones, and digitally mediated social networks and are more engaged than the rural areas (UNICEF, 2021). Patterns and effects of using social media are also influenced by gender relations, cultural values, and educational experiences (Livingstone et al., 2017). As an example, there are various social pressure and online harassment risks that young women might encounter and influence their involvement and expression in digital civic space (Valkenburg and Peter, 2011). The awareness of these contextual differences is critical in the development of interventions that will maximize the positive effects of social media on the engaged youth and reduce the risks.

Some of the recent studies point to the importance of content type, platform design, and algorithmic governance, in determining the youth engagement. Instagram and Tik Tok are visual platforms that promote self-expression and social interchange, whereas platforms based on microblogging, such as X, promote political discussion and debate (Guzman et al., 2019). The algorithmic recommendation systems are significant in content visibility, which affects the variety of perspectives that the users will see and the chances of an echo-chamber development (Pariser, 2011). Theorists claim that the platform architecture together with media literacy defines either the social media as an empowering form of active civic engagement or as a source of misinformation and superficial interaction.

Moreover, the literature points to the fact that media literacy education can be considered as one of the means to refine the positive and reduce the negative effects of social media. The youth can be taught in programs on critical thinking, fact-checking, and ethical online behavior to navigate through the digital environment in a responsible manner (Buckingham, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2017). Such interventions not only make one an informed civic member, but also build resilience towards internet harassment, misinformation and behavior manipulation. The relevance of such learning interventions in both the formal and informal community based learning context would help to complement the beneficial nature of social media on the behavior and civic activism of the youth.

In conclusion, one may observe that the reviewed literature presents the picture that social media is a rather controversial phenomenon that can affect the behavior of youths, their identity formation, and civic participation to an enormous extent. Inasmuch as it may be helpful in informational propagation, participatory learning and social activism, it has its own share of problems, such as misinformation, psychological well-being and shallow learning. According to researchers, the most important way to maximize the positive impact of social media is critical digital literacy or the possibility of institutions to facilitate the use of social media and sensitivity to contextual variables influencing access and usage (Boulianne, 2020; Ito et al., 2020). In this review, the idea of the need to undertake interdisciplinary research and policy interventions capable of finding a balance between the empowering nature of social media and its ethical, psychological, and societal consequences is highlighted.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is secondary data analysis, which is used to investigate the role of social media on the behavior of youths and civic engagement. Secondary data analysis refers to the organized utilization of existing data, published findings, scholarly articles and survey results in providing answers to a research question without the need to obtain new and original data (Johnston, 2017). Such a process is effective in exploring the trends, patterns and relationship within a population and is also effective in capitalizing on the reliability and scope of previous research. Through a combination of sources, the research will be able to give an in-depth insight into the role of digital platforms in influencing young people to engage in civic, social and political practices.

Data Sources

The research articles, reports on national and international surveys, and publicly available statistical databases were used in order to gather the data used in this study. Some of the central sources are the reports of Pew Research Center regarding the social media use among young people, as well as the reports by UNESCO regarding the digital literacy and civic education, along with the big datasets analyzing online behaviors in adolescents and young adults (Anderson and Jiang, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2020). The chosen sources are rigorous methodologically, representative of the youth populations and meaningful to the measures of social media and civic participation.

Data Collection and Criteria of selection

The systematic review of secondary sources was carried out with the help of academic databases (Google scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink). Some of the keywords used in the search were; social media and youth behavior, digital activism, online civic engagement, youth participation in democracy, and digital literacy. Articles and research published in the years between 2015 and 2025 were given preference due to their updated trends in using social media. Only the sources containing the empirical results, representative sampling, and giving specific measures of youth engagement were considered. The articles that do not have methodological transparency, opinion and editorials were excluded so as to have the credibility and reliability of the analysis (Boslaugh, 2007).

Analytical Framework

Both the quantitative synthesis and qualitative thematic analyses were used to analyze the secondary data. Quantitative synthesis was the summation of statistics of the frequency of social media use, the preference of platforms, the types of content they engage with, and their civic activity. The descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and correlation coefficients as reported by other researchers were retrieved to establish the trends and associations between civic engagement and social media interaction (Pew Research Center, 2018; Lenhart, 2019).

In the case of qualitative synthesis, thematic analysis was used in textual results of surveys, interviews, and case studies covered in the literature. Awareness, peer influence, digital activism, barriers to engaging, and ethical considerations were the key issues that were noted in different research works (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Such an approach allowed making sure that behavioural insights would be added to the numerical data that would provide a clear picture of the relationship between young people and social media.

Secondary Data Analysis Rationale

The choice of the secondary data analysis approach is particularly appropriate to the selected research due to several reasons. First, it gives access to a vast and varied data that would be logistically and financially difficult to gather whenever primary research was employed. Second, it allows making comparisons between regions, age groups, and types of platforms, which increase the applicability of results. Third, the technique enables longitudinal insights, since numerous datasets follow the trend of social media behavior over several years (Johnston, 2017). Lastly, secondary analysis reduces respondent burden and ethical dangers linked to face-to-face data collection of minors, and is in line with responsible research.

Validity and Reliability Reflections

Data sets and reports with well documented methodologies and sampling procedures only were included to achieve validity and reliability. Cross-validation was performed by finding the results of various sources to identify anomaly or inconsistency. Moreover, possible biases in the original data, including errors related to self-reporting or overrepresentation on any platform, were also evaluated critically, and the consequences of such issues on the interpretation were discussed. Ethics were upheld through appropriate referencing of all sources as well as following copyright rules.

Limitations

In as much as secondary data analysis has numerous benefits, it possesses its own limitations. The researcher is limited by the variables and measures applied in the studies made by others which are not necessarily corresponding to the particular research questions. Moreover, contextual factors (e.g., cultural difference or platform peculiarities of use) might be dependent on various datasets, and have to be interpreted carefully. Despite such limitations, the strictness of the methodology and the utilization of various sources contribute to the validity of the findings provided in the current study.

This study is an understandable, ethical and plausible manner of exploring the relationship that exists between social media and youth civic engagement. The paper utilizes the quality of secondary data to merge quantitative indicators and qualitative data, which constitute a powerful foundation of further data analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the secondary information in the shape of the scholarly articles, governmental reports, and the surveys provides the complicated picture of the impact of the social media on the behaviour of the youth and their participation in the political life. The data sources are primarily the reports of the Pew Research Center, the publications of the UN, and peer-reviewed articles that concentrate on the number of young adults who follow the digital lifestyle, the trend on online participation, and how these online interactions are translated into real civic engagements (Anderson and Jiang, 2018; Boulianne, 2020; United Nations, 2021).

Teenager Social Media Patterns

The statistics show that young people between the ages of 15-24 dedicate 2-4 hours a day to social media sites (Smith, 2020; Anderson and Jiang, 2018). Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, and Twitter are the most used platforms, but their impact on behaviors and civic activities significantly differ. Instagram and Tik Tok are the most effective in terms of lifestyle, trends, and socializing, whereas Twitter and Facebook are the means of news consumption, political discourse, and civic involvement (Pew Research Center, 2019). Another generational difference is also found in the analysis, as younger adolescents are more affected by trends of their peers and visual content, older youth is more involved into political and social matters online.

Power over Perception and Action

According to the secondary data, social media helps young people to raise their awareness on social, environmental and political issues tremendously. About 72 percent of the youth state that social media exposes them to the happenings of the world community, social trends, and civic actions (Pew Research Center, 2019). Viral campaigns and trending hashtags are another way of intensifying awareness and this is where a quick spread of information can be processed simultaneously. Nonetheless, awareness does not always lead to the change in behavior since the perceptions are usually misguided by misinformation and echo chambers (Tandoc et al., 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Online Civic Engagement

Secondary source analysis shows that young individuals are engaging in online civic activities such as signing of petitions, participating in awareness campaigns, sharing informative content, and engaging in online debates more and more. According to the statistics of the United Nations (2021), 65 percent of young people who use the internet have at least been involved in at one of the online civic or social activities. Boulianne (2020) cites a key point that online participation makes civic interest more visible and expressed, but often leads to so-called slacktivism, where the activities are superficial and do not have any offline follow-up.

Civic participation to Offline

Even though social media promotes awareness and digital activism, the online to offline shift is low. According to Loader et al. (2014), fewer than 40 percent of young people who use the online version also give back to their communities through service, volunteering, or voting. The plausibility of the information, socio-economic status, and level of digital literacy are also crucial moderators of offline interaction (Livingstone et al., 2017). Media literate and youth with better critical thinking skills have better potential to translate online participation into offline civic behaviors.

Behavioral and Psychological Effect.

The social media also influences the youth attitudes, norms, and decision making process. The concept of acceptable behavior, social values, and political views are defined by peer influence, trending topics, and influencers (Smith, 2020; Vaterlaus et al., 2021). Some of the positive consequences are the growth of awareness of social justice, climate activism, and the rise of human rights concerns, whereas some negative consequences are exposure to misinformation and polarization, as well as short attention spans (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Table 1: Summary of Key Findings from Secondary Data on Social Media Influence

Focus Area	Key Findings	Representative Sources
Social Media Usage Patterns	Youth spend 2–4 hours/day online; Instagram/TikTok influence lifestyle, Twitter/Facebook civic	Anderson & Jiang (2018); Smith (2020)
Awareness of Social Issues	72% of youth report increased awareness of politics, social causes, climate issues	Pew Research Center (2019)
Online Civic Engagement	65% participate in petitions, campaigns, and online discussions	United Nations (2021); Boulianne (2020)
Offline Civic Participation	Less than 40% convert online engagement to volunteering, voting, or community involvement	Loader et al. (2014); Livingstone et al. (2017)
Behavioral Influence	Peer pressure, trends, and influencers shape attitudes and social norms	Smith (2020); Vaterlaus et al. (2021)
Risks and Challenges	Misinformation, echo chambers, and shallow engagement (“slacktivism”)	Tandoc et al. (2018); Allcott & Gentzkow (2017)

Emerging Trends

Another emerging trend expressed in the secondary data and the use of gamification, influencer activism, and micro-volunteering sites that combine online activism with real-world civic engagement is also mentioned. Online voter registration drives, climate strikes, and challenges to raise awareness show that social media can inspire the younger generation into real action with the right guidance and support (UNICEF, 2020).

Synthesis of Data

The discussion reveals that social media is a facilitator and an obstacle. It enhances civic knowledge and civic awareness and online civic participation but is not always associated with offline civic participation. Such characteristics as the character of the media applied, digital literacy, dependability of the information, and social-economic origins precondition the success of social

media aimed at raising civic responsibility. The maximum benefit should be ensured with young behavior and civic engagement where strategic interventions are necessary in terms of education and policies.

Conclusion

The social media has emerged as a force that youths are being influenced to behave in a particular manner and to engage in civic activities, and through this media, the youths have a platform where they can share, talk and even stir. The analysis of the secondary data demonstrates that the youth is highly active online but there is still a mediocre transition into the real life offline civil life. These platforms as Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter make more people aware of social, political and environmental issues and peer pressure enhances interaction. However, this civic activity is limited by such aspects as misinformation, privacy and superficial communication.

According to the paper, the social media still have high possibilities of coming up with active, informed and responsible citizenship subject to further strategies. The awareness on the internet must translate into actual civic behavior through digital literacy, which involves acquisition of critical thinking skills and providing opportunities to meet offline. The social media, through a combination of online media campaigns and establishment of operations via education and community initiatives, can be used by policymakers, educators and youth agencies as a potent tool of civic engagement, social participation, and community development among the youth.

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