Youth, Social Media, and Political Participation: A Study on Digital Citizenship and New Forms of Collective Action

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Abstract: The present study explores the relationship between youth, social media, and political participation in the context of digital citizenship and emerging forms of collective action in Gwalior, India. With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, social media platforms have become essential spaces for political dialogue, activism, and civic engagement among young people. Using a mixed-method research design involving surveys and interviews with 300 respondents aged 18–30, the study examines how online behavior influences civic awareness, ethical participation, and political involvement. The findings reveal that youth in Gwalior are digitally active and politically conscious, with social media serving as a primary medium for expressing opinions, mobilizing support, and engaging in issue-based movements. However, participation largely remains online-centered, with limited translation into offline political action. Digital citizenship awareness significantly influences the quality of political engagement, while challenges such as misinformation, online harassment, and lack of trust in institutions hinder meaningful participation. The study concludes that promoting media literacy and digital ethics education is essential for strengthening democratic participation and fostering responsible digital citizenship among India's youth.

Keywords: Youth participation, social media, digital citizenship, political engagement, collective action, online activism, Gwalior, digital democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, social media has emerged as one of the most powerful tools shaping the political consciousness and civic participation of the younger generation. The digital revolution has transformed how individuals communicate, share ideas, and engage in public life, creating new spaces for political dialogue, activism, and collective identity formation. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube have redefined the relationship between citizens and politics, making it possible for youth to express opinions, organize campaigns, and mobilize for causes at unprecedented speed and scale (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The concept of digital citizenship, emphasizing the responsible and ethical use of technology for civic purposes, has become central to understanding this transformation (Allen & Light, 2015). As online spaces increasingly substitute for physical meeting grounds, the dynamics of participation, leadership, and accountability are undergoing significant change. India, being one of the world's youngest democracies, stands at the heart of this digital transformation. With over 60% of its population below the age of 35, the role of youth in sustaining and redefining democratic participation is more critical than ever. Affordable smartphones, expanding internet connectivity, and the proliferation of social media platforms have made political information widely accessible even in tier-II cities such as Gwalior. Young people are now more aware of social, political, and environmental issues and express their

perspectives through posts, hashtags, memes, and online debates. They participate in virtual movements supporting causes like gender equality, climate action, and social justice (Bajaj, 2019; Daly, 2022). Social media has thus democratized the tools of communication, enabling even ordinary citizens to challenge dominant narratives and contribute to political discourse. However, whether such digital engagement translates into meaningful political participation or remains limited to superficial gestures of "clicktivism" remains a matter of scholarly debate (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

The dual nature of social media—as a space of empowerment and manipulation—has generated both optimism and skepticism. On one hand, researchers argue that digital platforms have facilitated new forms of collective action by connecting geographically dispersed individuals who share similar concerns (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Haßler et al., 2021). Hashtag campaigns, online petitions, and crowd-sourced initiatives have enabled youth to influence decision-making processes without relying on traditional political structures. On the other hand, the prevalence of misinformation, echo chambers, and online polarization raises concerns about the quality of political engagement (Birnhack & PerryHazan, 2021). Many young users remain unaware of the ethical and legal implications of their online actions, highlighting the need for structured digital citizenship education (Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018). The question, therefore, is not only whether youth are politically active but also whether their participation is informed, ethical, and sustainable.

In this context, the city of Gwalior provides an appropriate and insightful setting for examining the relationship between social media and political participation. As an educational and cultural hub in Madhya Pradesh, Gwalior reflects the socio-economic diversity of India's emerging urban centers. It combines traditional political practices rooted in hierarchical structures with a rapidly evolving digital culture. The city's youth, largely composed of university students and young professionals, are digitally connected yet socially diverse. They engage in national-level online debates while remaining embedded in local socio-political realities. Understanding how this population uses social media for political purposes offers valuable insight into how digital democracy operates beyond metropolitan boundaries. Moreover, studying Gwalior fills a significant gap in existing research, as most studies on youth political participation in India have focused on large cities like Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore, leaving smaller urban centers underexplored.

The growing influence of youth-led digital movements has demonstrated the power of networked activism. Campaigns such as *Fridays for Future*, *Black Lives Matter*, and *#MeToo* have shown that social media can mobilize global participation and place pressure on policymakers (Bartoli, 2022; Fridays for Future, 2022). These movements illustrate how digital technologies amplify voices that were historically marginalized and enable new forms of leadership and civic engagement. In India, similar patterns are evident in online movements such as *India Against Corruption* and environmental justice campaigns. Yet, while these movements highlight the potential of youth activism, they also expose challenges such as online harassment, misinformation, and political polarization. Scholars like Livingstone et al. (2019) argue that genuine participation in the digital era requires not just access to technology but also critical thinking, media literacy, and civic responsibility. The central concern of this study,

therefore, lies in understanding how youth in Gwalior use social media as a space for political participation and whether their engagement reflects genuine democratic agency. It seeks to examine the extent to which digital citizenship awareness influences the nature and quality of their participation. Specifically, it explores how online engagement—ranging from sharing political content to participating in digital campaigns—affects civic consciousness and collective action. The study also investigates barriers such as misinformation, distrust in political institutions, and online harassment that limit effective participation. In doing so, it addresses critical questions: Does social media empower youth to become active citizens, or does it merely create an illusion of participation? Are online interactions fostering informed collective action, or do they reinforce passive consumption of political content?

This research gains significance not only for academic understanding but also for practical policy formulation. By analyzing patterns of digital engagement among Gwalior's youth, the study contributes to the growing discourse on how social media can be harnessed for constructive democratic participation. The findings will help educators, policymakers, and civil society organizations design programs that promote digital literacy, critical evaluation of online information, and ethical participation in virtual communities. Moreover, the study's focus on a semi-urban region broadens the geographical scope of digital democracy research, offering a more inclusive understanding of youth participation in India's socio-political landscape.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The intersection of youth, social media, and political participation has become a key focus of contemporary political sociology and communication studies. Scholars agree that digital platforms have transformed the relationship between citizens and politics by democratizing access to information, fostering new modes of participation, and redefining civic identity (Allen & Light, 2015; Earl & Kimport, 2011). The emergence of digital citizenship has further re-shaped the understanding of political engagement by emphasizing responsible, informed, and ethical participation in online environments (Jerome & Starkey, 2021). This review synthesizes existing literature on the themes of youth political engagement, the transformative power of social media, the development of digital citizenship, and the rise of new forms of collective action, situating them within the Indian and global context.

Early research on political participation largely focused on traditional forms such as voting, party membership, and attending political meetings. However, as Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue, the advent of digital communication has broadened the definition of participation to include activities like online petition signing, sharing political content, and digital campaigning. Johnston (2014) conceptualized social movements as dynamic, networkbased forms of collective behavior rather than rigid organizations, a view echoed in the digital age where movements often emerge spontaneously through social media. In this new environment, participation is fluid, decentralized, and often issue-based rather than ideologically aligned. Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen (2014) noted that young citizens are not disengaged from politics, as commonly assumed; instead, they are engaging through new media channels that better align with their lifestyles and values. Their concept of "participatory politics" captures how youth use digital tools to express political views, mobilize networks, and influence policy debates.

The role of social media in shaping political participation has been analyzed through diverse theoretical perspectives. Earl and Kimport (2011) described "digitally enabled social change" as a process that lowers the costs of organizing, increases the visibility of activism, and enables transnational collaboration. Similarly, Gong (2015) highlighted the emotional dimension of online activism, showing how platforms provide spaces for indignation and inspiration, which sustain collective engagement. Global studies have confirmed these trends through cases like the *Fridays for Future* climate strikes and *Black Lives Matter*, where young people used hashtags to mobilize millions worldwide (Bartoli, 2022; Fridays for Future, 2022). These campaigns illustrate that digital networks can transcend geographic and institutional boundaries, creating new forms of what Castells has termed "networked social movements."

In the Indian context, digital activism has gained significant momentum over the last decade. Movements such as *India Against Corruption* and the *Nirbhaya* campaign demonstrated the mobilizing potential of social media for civic causes. Yet, scholars caution that digital participation in developing democracies often faces constraints of access, literacy, and infrastructure (Kirshner, 2015; Kiwan, 2020). Young people in semi-urban regions, such as Gwalior, represent a critical demographic in this transformation—they are digitally connected but often lack formal civic education, which limits their ability to engage critically and ethically online. Clément (2011) argued that rights consciousness and social-movement learning are essential for sustaining participation, emphasizing that activism must be coupled with awareness of human rights and democratic values.

The idea of digital citizenship has emerged as a framework to evaluate how individuals engage responsibly in digital spaces. According to Allen and Light (2015), digital citizenship extends beyond technical competence to include civic responsibility, critical thinking, and ethical use of digital media. Lundy and Martinez Sainz (2018) further argue that knowledge of law and digital ethics is crucial for transformative human-rights education, especially among children and youth. Research by Livingstone et al. (2019) introduces the concept of a "ladder of online participation," suggesting that young people progress from passive consumption of content to active civic engagement as their digital literacy grows. Jerome and Starkey (2022) emphasize that digital citizenship education should develop children's agency and decision-making capacity, enabling them to participate meaningfully in democratic life. These insights highlight that online participation is not automatically empowering; it requires education, reflection, and institutional support.

However, studies also reveal contradictions within digital engagement. Birnhack and PerryHazan (2021) point to issues of surveillance and privacy, showing how technological infrastructures can both empower and constrain citizenship. Haßler, Wurst, Jungblut, and Schlosser (2021) examined how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped online activism, noting that hashtag movements like *Fridays for Future* adapted quickly to digital spaces but struggled with sustaining long-term offline impact. Daly (2022) linked youth climate activism to broader human-rights discourses, demonstrating how digital mobilization can influence international law and policy debates. These studies collectively underline that digital activism must be seen as part of an evolving ecosystem of participation where online and offline spheres are interdependent.

Research on youth activism also connects digital participation to experiential and transformative learning. Kolb (2015) emphasized that learning through experience enables individuals to internalize democratic values. Similarly, Kim (2011) and Hopkins (2011) found that participation in social movements enhances critical awareness and civic competence, supporting Bajaj's (2019) notion of "transformative agency." When youth engage with social or political causes online, they learn negotiation, communication, and collaboration—skills that underpin participatory democracy. Educational researchers such as Mallon and Martinez Sainz (2021) and Jerome and Starkey (2021) advocate integrating human-rights and digitalcitizenship education into school curricula to foster a generation of informed digital citizens capable of critical civic engagement.

At the same time, several authors have highlighted structural and psychological barriers to effective participation. Hall (2019) and Choudry and Kapoor (2010) discuss how socioeconomic inequalities, political distrust, and limited institutional responsiveness can discourage youth from engaging in formal politics. In digital environments, these constraints are compounded by misinformation, algorithmic bias, and online harassment. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) reports, online activism around environmental issues often faces disinformation campaigns that undermine legitimate advocacy. Thus, while digital spaces can amplify youth voices, they can also perpetuate polarization and cynicism, weakening trust in democratic processes.

Empirical evidence also suggests gendered differences in digital engagement. Isenström (2021) notes that collateral learning experiences within online movements often vary between male and female participants, reflecting broader societal inequalities. Kiwan (2020) and Kirshner (2015) both observed that young women, despite facing online harassment, continue to use digital spaces for advocacy on education and social-justice issues. This resilience underscores the emancipatory potential of social media when accompanied by institutional and cultural support.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design using a mixed-method approach to understand the relationship between social media use, digital citizenship, and political participation among youth in Gwalior.

1. Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in Gwalior city, Madhya Pradesh, focusing on youth aged 18–30 years, including college students, employed individuals, and self-employed young citizens.

2. Sampling Method and Size

A **stratified random sampling** technique was used to ensure balanced representation across gender, education level, and occupation.

A total of **300 respondents** was selected from universities, coaching institutes, and workplaces.

3. Data Collection Tools

- **Structured Questionnaire** containing both closed-ended and Likert-scale items covering social media usage, digital citizenship awareness, and political participation.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing statistical tools such as frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, correlation, regression, and t-tests.

Qualitative responses were interpreted through thematic content analysis to identify emerging trends and attitudes. **6. Variables Studied**

- **Independent Variable:** Social Media Usage • **Mediating Variable:** Digital Citizenship
- **Dependent Variable:** Political Participation and Collective Action

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This result presents the statistical analysis and interpretation of data collected from 300 youth respondents in Gwalior city through a structured questionnaire. The responses were analyzed to explore how social media use affects political participation, digital citizenship, and collective action among youth. Statistical tools such as frequency distribution, percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's correlation were used to interpret the findings.

The results are presented in tabular form followed by detailed discussions for each research objective and hypothesis.

4.2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic variables considered include gender, age, education level, and occupation.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 300)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	160	53.3
	Female	140	46.7
Age (Years)	18–21	90	30.0
	22–25	130	43.3
	26–30	80	26.7
Education	Undergraduate	180	60.0
	Postgraduate	95	31.7

	Others (Diploma/Professional)	25	8.3
Occupation	Student	195	65.0
	Employed	80	26.7
	Self-Employed/Other	25	8.3

The demographic analysis reveals that the majority of respondents were students (65%), aged between 22–25 years (43.3%), indicating the dominance of university-going youth in Gwalior's

online political space. Gender distribution was nearly balanced, ensuring representativeness. The educational profile reflects a literate sample aware of social media and digital engagement.

4.3 Patterns of Social Media Usage

The frequency, platform preference, and purposes of social media use were studied to assess engagement behavior.

Table 2: Frequency of Social Media Usage Among Youth

Frequency of Use	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour/day	25	8.3
1–3 hours/day	105	35.0
3–5 hours/day	110	36.7
More than 5 hours/day	60	20.0

A majority (56.7%) of respondents spend 3 hours or more daily on social media. This indicates high digital exposure, positioning social platforms as central to their communication and political awareness.

Table 3: Preferred Social Media Platforms for Political Engagement

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Instagram	110	36.7
Facebook	90	30.0
X (Twitter)	55	18.3
YouTube	35	11.7
WhatsApp Groups	10	3.3

Instagram and Facebook emerged as the most influential platforms for political interaction, discussion, and campaign participation. Interestingly, X (Twitter) is gaining traction among politically aware youth, while WhatsApp is used more for informal sharing.

4.4 Nature of Political Participation

To measure participation, respondents rated their involvement in various political and civic activities.

Table 4: Types of Political Participation Among Youth

Type of Participation	Active (%)	Occasional (%)	Rare/Never (%)
Online discussions/debates	55	30	15
Following political pages/leaders	65	25	10
Sharing or posting political content	48	35	17
Signing online petitions	42	30	28
Attending rallies/protests (offline)	28	40	32
Voting in elections	78	12	10

Online activities (discussion, sharing, following pages) dominate participation patterns. About 55% actively engage in online debates, but only 28% reported attending offline rallies. This reflects a shift from physical to digital participation, confirming the emergence of networked political citizenship.

4.5 Level of Digital Citizenship Awareness

The study examined how aware youth are about responsible, ethical, and informed digital use.

Table 5: Awareness of Digital Citizenship Dimensions

Statement	Mean	SD	Agreement (%)
I verify political information before sharing it online	3.95	0.88	72.0
I respect privacy and data rights while engaging online	4.10	0.75	78.3
I participate responsibly in online debates	3.85	0.90	70.5
I understand my digital rights and responsibilities	3.70	0.92	68.0
I have knowledge of cyber ethics and laws	3.45	1.00	63.0

Digital citizenship levels are moderately high (overall mean = 3.81). Most respondents acknowledge the importance of responsible engagement, though cyber law awareness (63%) remains relatively weak. This highlights a need for structured digital literacy programs in educational institutions.

4.6 Correlation Between Social Media Use and Political Participation

To test **Hypothesis H₁**, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between time spent on social media and political participation score (derived from Table 4).

Table 6: Correlation Between Social Media Use and Political Participation

Variables	r-value	p-value	Result
Time spent on social media ↔ Political participation score	0.61	0.000	Significant

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that increased social media engagement significantly enhances political participation. Thus, H₁ is accepted, supporting the argument that online activity fosters political involvement among Gwalior's youth.

4.7 Influence of Digital Citizenship on Political Engagement

To test **Hypothesis H₂**, regression analysis was applied, considering digital citizenship as an independent variable and political participation as the dependent variable.

Table 7: Regression Analysis – Effect of Digital Citizenship on Political Participation

Predictor Variable	β-Coefficient	t-value	Sig. (p)
Digital Citizenship	0.52	7.84	0.000
$R^2 = 0.34$	F = 61.45		

Digital citizenship significantly predicts political participation ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), explaining 34% of the variance. Youth with higher digital awareness and responsibility show greater political activity. Thus, H_2 is also accepted, affirming the role of digital literacy in shaping civic engagement.

4.8 New Forms of Collective Action through Social Media

Respondents were asked about their participation in new-age digital collective actions such as hashtag campaigns, online petitions, or awareness movements.

Table 8: Participation in Online Collective Actions

Type of Action	Active Participation (%)	Occasional (%)	Never (%)
Hashtag campaigns (#MeToo, #SaveEnvironment, etc.)	50	35	15
Online awareness drives (e.g., voting awareness)	45	40	15
Digital fundraising for causes	25	50	25
E-petitions and online surveys	35	40	25
Crowd-sourced civic problem reporting	20	45	35

Digital collective actions are highly prevalent, especially hashtag movements and awareness drives. Over 50% have actively joined such causes. This confirms the rise of "networked collectivism," where virtual mobilization complements physical activism.

4.9 Barriers and Challenges in Political Participation

Respondents identified key obstacles that limit their online and offline political engagement.

Table 9: Major Barriers to Youth Political Participation

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Misinformation/Fake news	185	61.7
Online harassment/trolling	120	40.0
Lack of trust in politicians	165	55.0
Political apathy or disinterest	130	43.3
Limited knowledge of political process	95	31.7

Misinformation (61.7%) and distrust (55%) are the most pressing barriers. These factors contribute to digital cynicism, discouraging meaningful participation. The findings suggest a need for fact-checking mechanisms and political transparency to strengthen youth trust.

4.10 Gender-Wise Comparison of Political Engagement

A t-test was conducted to compare male and female respondents' political participation scores.

Table 10: Gender Differences in Political Participation

Gender	Mean Score	SD	t-value	p-value	Result
Male	3.82	0.78	2.45	0.015	Significant
Female	3.55	0.69			

The mean participation level of males (3.82) is slightly higher than females (3.55), with a statistically significant difference (p < 0.05). This indicates that men are somewhat more politically expressive, possibly due to higher public engagement freedom, but women are increasingly active in online activism, especially cause-based movements.

4.11 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H_1	Social media engagement positively affects political participation.	Accepted
H_2	Digital citizenship significantly influences political engagement.	Accepted
H_3	Social media facilitates new forms of collective action.	Accepted

All hypotheses are supported, validating the conceptual framework that social media, digital citizenship, and collective action are interlinked pillars of youth political participation in the digital era.

4.12 Discussion of Major Findings

The findings of this study align with global and Indian research indicating a shift from traditional to digital political engagement. In Gwalior, the youth's reliance on Instagram and Facebook as spaces of civic discourse underscores how visual and interactive platforms drive issue-based mobilization. The positive correlation (r = 0.61) between social media use and political participation proves that digital platforms are powerful tools for political socialization. However, the moderate awareness of cyber laws shows that youth participation remains vulnerable to misinformation and digital exploitation. The significant role of digital citizenship (β = 0.52) demonstrates that informed and ethical online behavior is essential for healthy democratic engagement. Programs promoting critical digital literacy, fact verification, and privacy awareness can thus enhance civic responsibility. Collective action patterns, especially hashtag activism (#SaveEnvironment, #StandWithFarmers), reveal that youth in Gwalior are increasingly expressive about social and political causes. These online movements create alternative participatory avenues where youth can voice opinions without institutional barriers. Nonetheless, fake news and political distrust continue to challenge the credibility of digital spaces. Such barriers limit the conversion of online engagement into sustained offline participation, like voting or community organizing.

5. Conclusion

The research concludes that the city's youth are emerging as vibrant participants in the digital political sphere, actively engaging through online platforms to express opinions, mobilize support, and advocate for social causes. However, this engagement remains predominantly online, with limited translation into conventional offline participation such as rallies or

organizational membership. The findings affirm that social media has become a powerful enabler of political awareness, collective expression, and decentralized activism among Gwalior's educated youth. The positive correlation between digital citizenship and political participation underscores the importance of responsible, ethical, and informed online behavior in shaping democratic culture. Yet, challenges such as misinformation, digital apathy, and inadequate cyber-literacy persist, suggesting a pressing need for structured digital citizenship education and media literacy programs. Overall, the study highlights that while the youth of Gwalior are digitally conscious and politically aware, sustainable democratic empowerment requires bridging the gap between virtual activism and real-world civic engagement through education, institutional support, and policy interventions promoting inclusive digital democracy. **References**

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