

## EVALUATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION: A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT:

Social media has emerged as a powerful communication platform influencing democratic engagement, political awareness, and public discourse. This study examines its role as a tool for democracy among college students of KLE's Lingaraj College. A descriptive survey method was adopted, and primary data were collected from 130 students through a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed using SPSS with percentage analysis, mean scores, and standard deviation. Findings reveal widespread use of platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, with smartphones as the primary access device. Students primarily used social media for academic communication and information sharing, while many also followed political news. Most respondents perceived social media as beneficial for democracy by enhancing political awareness and civic discussion. However, concerns about misinformation and unreliable content highlight its dual role in democratic societies.

### KEYWORDS:

Social Media, Democracy, Political Awareness, Civic Engagement, Information Sharing, College Students.

### 1. Introduction

Social media is increasingly recognized as a vital element in modern democracies, functioning as a "fourth pillar" due to its ability to shape public opinion and disseminate information globally. Democracy demands active public participation, and media platforms play a crucial role in facilitating this engagement (Ashwin, 2022). The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication practices and expanded opportunities for diverse viewpoints to be expressed (Auger, 2013). Scholars analyze its influence on political discourse, considering both positive and negative outcomes. While social media enables individuals and groups to share opinions and mobilize support, concerns about

misinformation and polarization remain. Despite these issues, many citizens view social media as beneficial to democratic processes (Greenwood, 2022). The connection between social media and democracy has become increasingly important amid a global trend of democratic backsliding. Technological advancements, particularly smartphones and tablets, have enhanced individuals' ability to connect and share content, fostering an environment where more people can express their views on public policies and governance (Ellison & Hardey, 2014).

### **1.1. Role of social media in Democracy**

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, supporting activities such as purchasing, learning, and professional communication. It refers to accessible electronic tools that enable publishing, collaboration, and relationship building through interactive platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). These platforms have transformed global knowledge exchange and fostered real-time connections beyond geographical boundaries (Kamble & Bankapur, 2023). Democracy, meanwhile, is a system of governance in which citizens hold leaders accountable through competitive elections and the protection of fundamental rights (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Core features of liberal democracy include political legitimacy, an independent judiciary, and constitutional safeguards that define state–society relations and protect civil liberties (Moghadam, 2013). Sovereignty ultimately resides with the people, shaping international standards of political rights (Davies, 1999). In this context, social media plays a crucial democratic role by shaping public opinion and facilitating participation. It enhances political communication, supports electoral campaigns—as demonstrated by the Aam Aadmi Party during the Delhi Assembly elections—and promotes civic engagement (Ashwin, 2022). However, it also poses risks of misinformation and opinion manipulation, highlighting its dual impact on modern democracy.

## **2. Literature Review**

Several studies highlight the growing influence of social media on democratic processes worldwide. Jha and Kodila–Tedika (2020) examined the relationship between social media and democracy across more than 125 countries and found a positive association between the penetration of Facebook and democratic development. Their findings indicate that this

relationship is stronger in low-income nations, suggesting that social media exerts greater democratic influence in developing contexts than in wealthier countries. Similarly, Jennings et al. (2021) explored how an environmental social media film shaped political debate and participation. Grounded in normative democratic theory, their experimental study demonstrated that social media content can enhance information efficacy, motivating citizens to engage in discussions and collective environmental action.

Kent (2013) argued that digital technologies and expanded information access strengthen democracy by reshaping public relations practices in the post-mass media era. Likewise, Ellison and Hardey (2014) found that Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter revitalize local democratic participation in the United Kingdom by bridging the gap between service users and active citizens. Finally, Prokhorov (2012) emphasized social media's role in democratic evolution, particularly in contexts like Egypt, where restrictions on traditional media positioned Facebook as a crucial space for political communication and idea exchange.

### **3. Methodology**

The study employed a descriptive survey method to examine the role of social media in democracy. Primary data were collected from 130 students of KLE's Lingaraj College, Belagavi, using a structured questionnaire. The respondents were selected through convenience sampling. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software, and the results were interpreted using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

### **4. Hypotheses**

H10: There is no significant difference between Arts and Commerce students in their purpose of using Social Networking Sites.

H1a: There is a significant difference between Arts and Commerce students in their purpose of using Social Networking Sites.

H20: There is no significant difference between male and female students in their perception of social media's role in strengthening democracy.

H2a: There is a significant difference between male and female students in their perception of social media's role in strengthening

democracy.

## 5. Objectives

1. To assess social networking sites (SNS) usage patterns among college students.
2. To identify the purposes for which students use social networking sites, particularly for political information and civic engagement.
3. To assess students' perceptions of the role of social media in supporting democratic processes.
4. To analyze the influence of social media on political awareness, opinion formation, and participation among students.
5. To determine the most preferred social media platforms and devices used for accessing politics-related information.

## 6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

### 6.1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

**Table No 1: Demographic Information**

Characteristics	Categories	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	56	43.1
	Female	74	56.9
	Total	130	100.0
Stream	Arts	89	68.5
	Commerce	41	31.5
	Total	130	100.0
Age	Below 19	10	7.69
	19-20	33	25.3
	20-21	62	47.69
	21-22	16	12.3
	Above 22	9	6.9
	Total	130	100.0
Locality	Rural	83	63.8
	Urban	47	36.2
		130	100.0

Table 1 shows that 56.9% of respondents are female and 43.1% male,

with a majority (68.5%) from the Arts stream and 31.5% from Commerce. Most participants are aged 20–21 years (47.69%), followed by 19–20 years (25.3%), with smaller groups in the 21–22 years (12.3%), below 19 years (7.69%), and above 22 years (6.9%) categories. Additionally, 63.8% come from rural areas, while 36.2% are from urban areas.

## 6.2. Use of Social Networking Sites by respondents

**Table No 2: Use of Social Networking Sites**

Social Networking Sites	Yes	No	Mean	SD
WhatsApp	127(97.7)	3(2.3)	1.02	0.151
Instagram	110(84.6)	20(15.4)	1.15	0.362
Facebook	49(37.7)	81(62.3)	1.62	0.486
Telegram	79(60.8)	51(39.2)	1.39	0.490
X	28(21.5)	102(78.5)	1.78	0.413
Others	54(41.5)	76(58.5)	1.58	0.495

Table 2 indicates that 127 respondents (97.7%) use WhatsApp (Mean=1.02, SD=0.151), making it the most preferred social networking site. Similarly, 110 respondents (84.6%) use Instagram (Mean=1.15, SD=0.362), reflecting its strong popularity. 79 respondents (60.8%) reported using Telegram (Mean=1.39, SD=0.490). In contrast, usage of Facebook (49; 37.7%) and X (28; 21.5%) is comparatively low. Additionally, 54 respondents (41.5%) use other platforms. The findings infer that instant messaging and visually engaging platforms dominate students' preferences, while traditional networking sites show declining relevance among the younger population.

## 6.3. Preference of Devices to access Social Networking Sites by the respondents

**Table No 3: Preference of Devices to access Social Networking Sites**

Devices	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean	SD
Smart Phone	111(85.4)	10(7.7)	8(6.2)	1(0.8)	–	4.78	0.588
Laptop	12(9.2)	15(11.5)	62(47.7)	27(20.8)	14(10.8)	2.88	1.057
PC	6(4.6)	15(11.5)	49(37.7)	32(24.6)	28(21.5)	2.53	1.094

Tablet	6(4.6)	10(7.7)	28(21.5)	33(25.4)	53(40.8)	2.10	1.160
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Table 3 indicates that smartphones are the most preferred device for accessing social networking sites, with 85.4% of respondents using them regularly and a high mean score of 4.78. Laptops are used occasionally by 47.7%, resulting in a moderate mean score of 2.88. PCs have limited usage, with a mean of 2.53, while tablets are the least preferred, with 40.8% never using them, reflected in the lowest mean score of 2.10 and a higher SD of 1.160.

#### 6.4. Average Time Spent in Using SNSs by respondents

**Table No 4: Average Time Spent in Using SNSs**

Time	Number	Percentage
Below 1 hour	17	13.1
1–2 hours	64	49.2
2–3hours	27	20.8
3–4 hours	13	10.0
More than 5 hours	9	6.9
Total	130	100.0

The data indicate that most respondents spend a moderate amount of time on social networking sites. Nearly half (49.2%) spend 1–2 hours daily, while 20.8% spend 2–3 hours. Smaller groups spend 3–4 hours (10.0%) or over 5 hours (6.9%), suggesting heavy usage is limited. Additionally, 13.1% spend less than one hour, showing low engagement for a minor segment.

#### 6.5. Purpose of using Social Networking Sites by respondents

**Table No 5: Purpose of using Social Networking Sites**

purpose	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean	SD	Sig.
Entertainment	51(38.5)	21(16.2)	50(38.5)	6(4.6)	2(1.5)	3.87	1.045	.062
Communication	67(51.5)	29(22.3)	27(20.8)	4(3.1)	3(2.3)	4.18	1.015	
Sharing Photos and Videos	48(36.9)	23(17.7)	41(31.5)	14(10.8)	4(3.1)	3.75	1.157	

To know politics-related news	58(44.6)	25(19.2)	39(30.0)	6(4.6)	2(1.5)	4.01	1.038
Academic or study purpose	87(66.9)	21(16.2)	16(12.3)	5(3.8)	1(0.8)	4.45	0.907
make new friends	31(23.8)	15(11.5)	40(30.8)	20(15.4)	24(18.5)	3.07	1.404
To share information	72(55.4)	15(11.5)	30(23.1)	6(4.6)	7(5.4)	4.07	1.208
Others	28(21.5)	16(12.3)	39(30.0)	17(13.1)	30(23.1)	2.29	1.433

Table 5 shows that social networking sites are primarily used for academic purposes, with 87 respondents (66.9%) always and 21 (16.2%) often using them for study (Mean=4.45, SD=0.907). Communication is also significant, as 67 (51.5%) always and 29 (22.3%) often use them for this purpose (Mean=4.18). For sharing information, 72 (55.4%) always use these platforms. Regarding political news, 58 (44.6%) always and 25 (19.2%) often access such content (Mean=4.01). Entertainment remains important, with 51 (38.5%) always using it. However, making new friends and other purposes show comparatively lower preference. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences in usage purposes between Arts and Commerce students ( $p = 0.062$ ), supporting the null hypothesis.

### 6.6. Role of Social Media in Strengthening Democracy

**Table No 6: Role of Social Media in Strengthening Democracy**

	Number	Percentage	Sig.
Yes	78	60.0	.420
No	1	0.8	
Maybe	51	39.2	
Total	130	100.0	

Table 6 shows that 60.0% of respondents believe social media benefits democracy, indicating a positive view of its role in awareness and participation. Meanwhile, 39.2% are uncertain, acknowledging both its advantages and challenges, while only 0.8% hold a negative stance. A Chi-square test found no significant difference in perceptions by gender, with a  $p$ -value of 0.420, suggesting similar views among male and female students regarding social media's impact on democracy.

## 6.7. Impact of Social Networking Sites on Politics

**Table No 7: Impact of Social Networking Sites on Politics**

Impact	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Raise public awareness about political and social issues	56(43.1)	60(46.2)	13(10.0)	1(0.8)	-	4.32	0.682
Changes people's minds about political and social issues	41(31.5)	62(47.7)	23(17.7)	4(3.1)	-	4.08	0.784
Get officials to pay attention on issues	31(23.8)	60(46.2)	30(23.1)	8(6.2)	1(0.8)	3.86	0.878
informed about current events in other countries	55(42.3)	58(44.6)	13(10.0)	3(2.3)	1(0.8)	4.25	0.791
Spread of false information and rumors	43(33.1)	32(24.6)	31(23.8)	18(23.8)	6(4.6)	3.68	1.202

Table 7 shows the Impact of Social Networking Sites on Politics. A large majority of respondents believe SNSs raise public awareness about political and social issues, with 89.3% agreement and a mean score of 4.32. Similarly, 86.9% agree that SNSs help users stay informed about current events in other countries, with a mean of 4.25. Many also feel SNSs influence people's political opinions, showing 79.2% agreement and a mean score of 4.08. Moderate agreement is seen regarding SNSs' role in drawing officials' attention to issues, with 70.0% agreement and a mean of 3.86. At the same time, 57.7% acknowledge the spread of false information and rumors, reflected in a mean of 3.68, though opinions here are more varied. Overall, respondents view SNSs as important political tools for awareness and information, while also recognizing the risk of misinformation.

## 6.8. Most Used SNS for Political Information

**Table No. 8: Most Used SNS for Political Information**

Social Networking Sites	Yes	No
WhatsApp	78(60.0)	52(40.0)
Instagram	102(78.5)	28(21.5)
Facebook	66(50.8)	64(49.2)
Telegram	40(30.8)	90(69.2)
Twitter	52(40.0)	78(60.0)
Others	69(53.1)	61(46.9)

Table 8 reveals that Instagram is the leading platform for accessing politics-related news, with 78.5% of respondents using it, followed by WhatsApp at 60.0%. Other platforms show moderate use, with 53.1% for one and Facebook at 50.8%. In contrast, Twitter and Telegram are less commonly used, at 40.0% and 30.8%, respectively. Overall, Instagram and WhatsApp are preferred for political news consumption.

## 7. Major Findings

- High Overall Use of social media: WhatsApp 97.7% and Instagram 84.6% are the most used platforms, showing a strong preference for instant and visual communication tools.
- Smartphones Dominate Access: 85.4% of respondents always use smartphones to access social networking sites, making it the primary device.
- Moderate Daily Usage: Most students (49.2%) spend 1–2 hours per day on social media, indicating balanced usage.
- Academic Purpose is the Top Reason: 66.9% always use social media for academic or study-related work, followed by communication (51.5%) and information sharing (55.4%).
- Political Awareness Through social media: 44.6% always use social media to follow political news, showing its role in civic information.
- Positive View on Democracy: 60.0% believe social media is beneficial for democracy, while 39.2% remain uncertain.
- Raises Political Awareness: 89.3% agree that social media increases awareness of political and social issues.

- Influences Political Opinions: 79.2% believe social media can change people's political views, and 70.0% think it helps bring public issues to officials' attention.
- Concern About Misinformation: 57.7% acknowledge that social media spreads false information and rumors.
- Top Platforms for Political News: Instagram 78.5% and WhatsApp 60.0% are the leading sources for accessing politics-related news.

## 8. Conclusion

The study reveals that social media plays a significant role in strengthening democratic engagement among youth. Most respondents believe platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp enhance political awareness, discussion, and access to information, with smartphones as the primary access device. Social media supports participatory democracy by enabling opinion expression and civic interaction. However, concerns about misinformation, rumors, and biased content remain. The study recommends integrating digital literacy into education, improving platform fact-checking, and implementing balanced regulations to curb misinformation while safeguarding freedom of expression and promoting responsible online behavior.

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