Ambivalent Engagement: Social Media on Campus

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Abstract

Social Media has reshaped how education is delivered to students. Consequently, these 'means' have given a voice to the oppressed and put up a daring fight against the silent evils of society today. The paper ardently reviews secondary literature to examine how social media influences academic engagement and activism. Social media is commonly used to share information and resources, enhancing participation and collaboration among peers of varied ages, ethnic groups, and social statuses. The paper explores simple themes, including the benefits students reap from social media, as well as challenges such as "slacktivism" (clicking without action), censorship, and online harassment. Alternatively, it sheds light on the courageous steps that students have taken repeatedly, throughout history, in the wake of tyranny. The research further underlines the branded labels of slacktivism that are a weaponised tool, used to undermine the importance of ongoing issues and control the narrative of the public. It recommends the promotion of social media in the education sector by implementing digital literacy programs and policies to support responsible activism and the fairness of digital access.

Keywords: Academic Engagement, Resource Sharing, Slacktivism, Activism, Digital Literacy.

1. Introduction

So, what is social media? Well, it is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking *(Oxford Languages)*. From Twitter and Facebook to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Schoology, and Quora, social media has far outshone any other tools in providing education. Institutions can establish connections with a variety of audiences by using social media while directly engaging with students, teachers, staff, and alumni. Teachers can add engagement to an online-only class by creating a social media page or account just for community-building. This creates jobs for the disabled, remote workers, stay-at-home parents and students working for a passive income.

There has always been activism on college campuses, and student activism has been part of some of the largest popular movements in history, such as the #MeToo movement and #BlackLivesMatter movement. This research creates a better understanding of student activism on college campuses and the changes in activism in light of the new digital age. It also studies how the digital environment serves as an educational space for learning about human rights. With these social media platforms, students can now organise protests and demonstrations quickly than ever before, sometimes in a remote or localised manner. This has created a fairly new idea of activism called slacktivism. However, it is a known fact that student activism has its own challenges when systems are questioned.

2. Literature Review

i). Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) have examined the use of social media for student activism in the 21st century. The authors have criticised 'slacktivism', which they believe has no real impact but appears to be politically engaging. They believe that the foundation of good activism lies in the sincerity of interest in the matter. Phrases such as 'surface-level' and 'self-promoting' form of participation have been used to give a negative connotation to slacktivism. Additionally, they underline how slacktivism also blurs the lines between true activism and a pretentious digital presence.

ii). Ntuli and Teferra (2017) have carefully examined the role of social media in the rise of protest in South Africa. Students now use these platforms to their benefit to speak out and voice their opinions on current issues. Additionally, they can improve coordination and communication using social media platforms to organise student action. However, these protests sometimes cannot be deemed 'organised' if weak leadership hinders engagement with authorities. They use learning community theory as their framework. They recommend that governments provide better digital infrastructure to promote engagement in student-led activism.

iii). Tanksley, Tiera Chante (2019) investigated social media as a tool for resistance against the voice of oppression. The power of this tool has shown its influence during the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The research studies 17 black women pursuing their undergraduate studies across the U.S.A. and Canada. They used theories such as the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). Alarmingly, women reported feeling safer in digital spaces than in the real world. Social media has provided them safety, visibility and community. However, social media can also expose these groups to more anti-black comments.

iv). Shafiq and Parveen (2023) investigate how students' relationships via social networking sites (SNS) influence knowledge sharing, which relates to student engagement in higher education. A deep dive was done in the top 10 South Asian universities, with a sample size of 234 students. There was a positive correlation between the use of social media and learning outcomes. Moreover, access to valuable information and student engagement can lead to a positive academic performance. They also comment on how students and educators can make use of social media according to ease of use. They recommend a correct and balanced incorporation that can aid students, teachers and the institutions.

v). Koranteng, Wiafe, and Kuada (2018) analysed the relation between students and social media's knowledge-sharing capabilities and academic engagement in education. They used the social capital theory to study how these networks help to create value for individuals, students and educators. Contrary to common belief, an aggregated sample of 586 students believes that social media is not an effective learning tool. They unanimously also agreed that knowledge sharing doesn't always lead to engagement among students. However, the authors argue that the respondents may not be using social media correctly for their studies. They recommend that if students use apps such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, they would have a positive outlook towards social networking sites.

3. Statement of the Research Problem

As mentioned earlier, the rapid growth of social media has increased communication among students and mobilised them to raise awareness on social and political dilemmas. Although platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have increased engagement among students, it has also invited criticism on the blurred lines between meaningful activism and 'slacktivism'. Although multiple studies suggest an increase in collaboration and access to knowledge, very few studies have simultaneously promoted academic engagement and student activism. The question also remains whether these digital interactions bring educational and social change. The paper aims to study the dual role of social media in education engagement and activism, exploring their potential and limitations.

4. Objectives of the Study

i). To study social media in the context of higher education engagement and activism.

ii). To list out platforms that students use for education and activism.

iii). To understand the benefits and drawbacks of social media.

iv). To evaluate the use of social media in student activism over the years.

v). To recommend ways social media can be used better in both education and activism.

5. Research Methodology

As the study primarily depends upon secondary data sources such as scholarly articles, institutional reports and previous studies, it adopts an exploratory and descriptive way of research. An exploratory type research methodology is used to identify patterns, relationships and emerging issues (i.e slacktivism) rather than testing a specific hypothesis. It does this, intending to explore the duality of social media in enhancing engagement in education as well as promoting higher education. The descriptive research methodology is used to analyse existing data and trends from secondary sources.

Sources of Data Collection

This study is entirely drawn based on secondary data collected from credible and scholarly sources. Data was collected from journals, reputable news articles, academic books, research reports, and other trustworthy websites such as the National Library of Medicine, India Today, MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Immigration Policies by The Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Statistics have been drawn after thorough examination from Global Digital Reports and the 'Internet and Mobile Association of India' (IAMAI). The selected literature examines how social media has helped in engaging student concerning their education. Additionally, the literature also focuses on student activism, including reports of student-led protests that had a great impact.

6. Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is restricted to data analysed from secondary data sources. The paper focuses on how social media influences both student engagement and activism. It covers topics on how these social media platforms are used to share knowledge and participate in academic discussions. It also sheds light on how activism has never been made easier with a more connected world. It explains how conveniently students can organise and support social movements. Challenges such as misinformation, censorship, and online harassment are also covered.

7. Social Media and Its Role in Higher Education Engagement

i). Statistics

"At least 85% of students in one study reported using social media for educational purposes, with a significant number spending over four hours a day on it." (*India Today*)

According to Pew Research, 95% of American teens use at least one social media platform. So, an educator would want to engage their students using technology that they already interact with daily. Now, let's focus on statistics in India. India, with its fast-growing population, has 806 million internet users. (*Global Digital Report, 2025*) In India today, 398 million youth utilise social media. According to a 2023 survey published by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), teenagers spend more than two to three hours on websites like YouTube and Instagram.

ii). Social Media Applications Used for Education

- **YouTube:** An abundance of educational videos offered by educators around the world, making it easier for users to select videos that cater to their needs and

< 7 >

understanding.

- **LinkedIn:** A professional development platform for students to connect with industry professionals and mentors.
- **TedEd:** Offers educational videos and lessons, often presented in a shorter and animated format.
- **TeachersConnect:** A platform that was created to connect educators for sharing resources.

iii). Benefits of Social Media in Higher Learning Engagement

- Real-time communications can increase student engagement, collaboration, communication and overall participation.
- Many students have found it easier to participate in online discussions as opposed to physical classrooms actively. 77% of attendance was recorded for online classes, compared to 57% in physical classrooms. (*National Library of Medicine, 2022*)
- Students and teachers can rapidly share a useful resource at any time.
- Social media can provide a contingency plan for unplanned remote learning opportunities.

iv). Drawbacks of Social Media in Higher Learning Engagement

- Social media can often serve as a major obstacle to the learning process in class, particularly when students are accessing their personal accounts without adult supervision. All sorts of distractions come in the form of private side conversations, irrelevant content, and pointless scrolling on the Internet during class.
- If students are often depending on social media to participate in class discussions, they lose out on the opportunity to practice face-to-face conversations and polite, in-person discussions.
- Some students may even mistake social media assignments as an opportunity to cyberbully their classmates, so it is important to set solid ground rules around the appropriate use of social media in the classroom.
- There is always a good chance that one of the group members will post inappropriate content or language, because it is tough to monitor and prevent students from using social media platforms inappropriately. Teachers have to be responsible and diligent administrators to discourage and address this type of behaviour.

8. Social Media and Activism
Activism is a deep-rooted phenomenon in Gen-Z, sprouting as an outcome of readily available information through social media, allowing a clear line between right and wrong. Social media platforms help student activism flourish by mobilising them towards different movements through hashtags, campaigns and petitions. Student activism has now become a common occurrence as access to information has been made equal for everyone. They can now stand grounded in their morals and protest against wrong and support greater causes.

i). Social Media as an Engine for Student Activism
Secondary studies and reports show social media's importance in modern campus protests and campaigns:

- **Hashtags:** Hashtags and viral content quickly draw attention to political, social and economic issues, making

it easier for student voices to reach a wider audience. It helps put pressure on governments to take corrective actions on account of surfacing issues. The growth of racial-justice protests in 2020 shows how online presence mobilised students and increased institutional inspection. (*Lauren O'Neil, 2025*)

- **Rapid mobilisation of action plans:** Direct messaging, real-time video streams, and live streaming help to organise rallies. Encrypted and private social media applications help create discrete plans.
- **Hybrid activism**: Studies indicate the most effective activism combines online awareness with offline strategies. Public demonstrations and protests must be done to avoid critiques of slacktivism or 'just not being taken seriously.'

ii). Social Media Applications Used for Activism
- **Telegram:** This messaging app is popular with activists for its strong encryption, privacy-based nature, and ability to host large channels and groups.
- **Discord:** It was initially created for gamers, now a popular platform for niche communities and for real-time engagement.
- **Instagram:** It is an app that can help to organise and mobilise peers through posts, direct messaging, and posting links to events, petitions, etc.
- **Twitter (X):** This long-standing app in the social media market generates public pressure by using hashtags to start conversations and making topics trend, influencing public opinion and political policies.

iii). Criticisms Regarding Social Activism
Although social media has expanded its horizons by providing a platform for student activists, it also amplifies the possibilities of several dangers. These dangers can undermine genuine advocacy efforts made by students.

- **Slacktivism:** This is an act of showing support online through likes, shares or hashtags without any real-world involvement. However, just the mere act of liking, sharing and creating hashtags can boost awareness on a situation. It can also help notify higher-position authorities to act or to take responsibility for their actions.
- **Misinformation:** "Not everything you see online is true." This is the truth. Misinformation can lead to the distortion of facts and weaken the credibility of legitimate movements. This may lead to arguments as well as biased opinions of the public, depending on what they think is right or wrong.
- **Censorship:** Censorship by governments, institutions, or platform algorithms can suppress people's voices. This is also against the right to freedom of speech and democratic participation. Everyone must get a fair chance at being heard and expressing their stance.
- **Online Harassment:** This includes hate speech, racism, trolling and cyberbullying. Consequently, these targets marginalised student activists, discouraging them from continued engagement. A safe digital space must be created for activist to voice their concerns.

iv). Examples of Social Media and Student Activism
1. #MeToo Movement:
The #MeToo movement was initiated in 2006 by Tarana Burke to empower and support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of colour. The hashtag #MeToo

< 8 >

went viral in October 2017 after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged people to share their experiences in response to allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Significant incidents (notably the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case) have led to heightened involvement. Movements such as 'Pinjra Tod' ("Break the Cage") and 'Hokkolorob' ("Let There Be Noise") led to campus demonstrations. These efforts confront both sexual harassment within educational institutions and the overarching patriarchal control of student environments.

The use of hashtags and social media applications like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allowed the rapid spread of this movement. This allowed other victims to surface and talk about their experience. This movement was a global phenomenon that allowed the hashtag, '#MeToo', to be used 40 million times from 2017 to 2019 (metoomvmt.org, 2019)

me too. International envisions a world free from sexual violence

2. #BlackLivesMatter

"In 2013, three radical Black organisers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, created a Black-cantered political movement, building projects called #BlackLivesMatter in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman" (*Black Lives Matter.com*)

On May 25, 2020, in Minnesota, a police officer, named Derek Chauvin, killed George Floyd, a Black man, by pressing his knee into his neck for almost nine minutes as the street around them stood and watched. This case erupted into months of protests nationwide, with crowds chanting in the streets against police brutality and the injustices faced by black communities. Protestors voiced their stance, pressing for solidarity that bridged differences. Later, the phrase "All Lives Matter" brought white supremacy and broader social justice issues to the surface, insisting that police brutality affects not only race but also women, like Breonna Taylor and LGBTQ+ people, including Tony McDade. As a result, in 2020, in Gainesville, local groups and the University of Florida stepped up to confront racism, gender violence, and police brutality. (*University of Florida, 2021*)

Black Lives Matter imagines a world where Black people across the diaspora thrive, experience joy, and are not defined by their struggles.

3. The Change in Immigration Policies by the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

In Canada, international students, mostly from India, are rallying against a new rule that stops 'Post Graduation Work Permit' extensions after December 31, 2023. This change puts about 130,000 students in danger. With many PGWPs about to expire, many Indians face the possibility of deportation. In late August, protests broke out in places like Brampton, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Winnipeg, with slogans "good enough to work, good enough to stay" and "stop mass deportation." Students protest that they arrived legally, studied, worked, and now face permanent residency draws stall and rules shift without warning. This led to students paying thousands for Labour Market Impact Assessments, while others apply for refugee status or even turn to the U. S. in hopes of avoiding deportation. Students have voiced the feeling of abandonment, despite the years of paychecks, taxes, and hard work they poured into Canada's economy. The PIE News had spoken to a former international student, Mehakdeep Singh, whose PGWP is set to expire in three months. He stated that he was set to receive his PR by April

2024, but the delays obstructed his plans.

9. The Role of Social Media in Higher Education Engagement Promoting Student Activism

Social media has arisen as a vibrant medium that connects scholarly involvement and student activism in higher education. Through transforming communication, collaboration, and awareness, social media enhances student engagement in educational pursuits while also enabling them to confront injustices and make significant contributions to social advancement. When utilised correctly, these platforms encourage a generation of students who are not only academically involved but also socially conscious, politically engaged, and dedicated to fostering inclusive and transformative learning spaces.

According to research done by students at the G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology (Pantnagar, Uttarakhand, India), 75% of students used social media to access educational content. This shows how social media is an essential tool used by students to educate themselves. The research also showed that the content that students interact with on social media also includes 69% entertainment, 62% news, and 57% social issues content. (Archives of Current Research International, 2024)

This just goes to show that social media has helped students around the world to access education and share resources to their benefit. This education, in turn, raises awareness on important social, political and economic issues. Students realise the powers that education gives them. Students now easily organise protests and rallies, getting support from around the globe, and providing them with vital information.

10. Conclusion

Social media has emerged as a significant influence in determining how students interact in higher education and take part in activism. It has reformed communication, enabling students to exchange ideas, work together on academic projects, and promote awareness of social issues worldwide. Social media Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have created opportunities for students to gather for causes, adopt inclusion, and elevate marginalised voices. Nonetheless, the research also highlights issues like slacktivism, misinformation, censorship, and online harassment that may undermine authentic activism and educational results. Despite these obstacles, social media continues to be a powerful tool for fostering digital involvement and democratic participation in educational environments.

11. Recommendations

i). **Digital Literacy Training:** This skill set is crucial for academic success, future career growth, and informed participation in a technology-driven world. (*Panorama Education*) Colleges and universities must implement courses that instruct students on how to assess online information properly and act responsibly on social networking sites.

ii). **Institutional Assistance:** Institutions can create social media platforms or forums where students can collaborate with their peers for academic projects, participate in discussions, and raise questions. A safe space must also be created for students to express their views on social issues. The use of social networking sites can also help to bridge the gap between students and educators.

< 9 >

iii). **Policy Frameworks:** Explicit regulations regarding online behaviour, privacy, and activism must be established to safeguard students against harassment and false information. A protected environment promotes safe reporting mechanisms and counselling. This assures that activism can take place in a respectful digital environment.

iv). **Promoting Genuine Activism:** Students need to be motivated to excel in digital advocacy and engage in significant offline activities to ensure tangible change in the real world. While social media can raise awareness, it is necessary to realise that genuine activism requires participation in community-based projects and student organisations. Universities must support this by providing students with a platform for workshops, student-led initiatives and campaigns to ensure tangible change.

v). **Additional Research:** Additional research could examine the lasting effects of social media on student activism and its influence in forming public engagement outside of higher education. Institutions should also assess the effectiveness of their digital engagement strategies regularly to ensure they align with student needs and technological advancements.

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< 10 >