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Role of Social Media in Higher Education Engagement and Activism

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine how higher education students are influenced by social media use in terms of their level of student engagement and activism. Student engagement has three aspects, which include academic engagement, social engagement and institutional engagement, whereas activism consists of students' involvement in a variety of social causes including environmental, social justice and political causes. Theories that will be used to support the findings of this study include: motivation; collective efficacy; diffusion of information; and digital literacy. At the end of this paper, there will be recommendations for teachers, institutions, government policies and future research.

Keywords: Social Media, digital literacy, higher education engagements, activism.

Introduction

College and university students now consider social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp an integral part of their day-to-day lives. Although they are used for many purposes such as socializing, entertainment, developing one's identity, and learning; social media sites serve as outlets for students to interact with each other and/or faculty, promote activism, and enhance overall student learning. As HEI institutions recognize that social media may be able to affect the outcomes of students in addition to the grades earned by them - the sense of belonging, civic identity, social awareness, involvement in causes, and governance of the institution - the potential benefits of social media are accompanied by the added complexities of digital distractions, spreading misinformation, creating echo chambers, cyberbullying, protecting student privacy, and unequal access. This research paper will examine ways social media promotes (and detracts from) college and university student engagement and activism.

Evidence on Academic and Institutional Student Engagement:

Academic and institutional engagement has been studied empirically through several means.

Social Media Use, Academic Engagement, and Creativity:

- Social media use is shown to increase academic engagement and creativity, specifically when mediated by internal motivation; however, cyberbullying is a boundary condition that decreases both measures.

- A second empirical study, which employed a model of constructivism and TAM, demonstrated that actual use of social media for engagement is highly correlated with increased student satisfaction, perceived usefulness, and improved learning outcomes.
- Universities use social media for institutional communication, branding, alumni engagement, reporting on student successes, and reinforcing community values; these efforts contribute to developing a sense of identity and belonging among all students

Learning Communities and Collaboration

- Social media platforms can facilitate collaborative learning: group discussions, peer feedback, projects across geographies, resource sharing. A study on collaborative learning found that social media supports discussion, feedback, digital literacy, and overcomes geographical barriers.
- Engagement is higher when content is interactive, emotionally resonant, or informational, rather than purely formal announcements. For institutional social media, such as Facebook pages for higher education institutions, posts that trigger emotions usually receive more likes and shares.

Empirical Evidence on Activism

- **Group Movements and Effectiveness:** The study "Youth collective activism... points out the importance of collective efficacy. Social media makes awareness translate into action when students feel that they can

make a difference.

- **Framing and News Exposure:** A case study of the US college population of students observed the influence of exposure to discrimination in news on social media on the intention to participate in activism. The findings demonstrated that such exposure elevates anger and awareness of problems, which raises the intention to engage in activism. But responses are different across the lines of various demographic segments.
- **Environmental and Sustainability Movements:** More recent (e.g. Digital Natives, Digital Activists) work explains how social media has been used by young people to mobilize around environmental issues. The tactics that are common are hashtags, global networks, storytelling, and coordinating online and offline activities. Some of the challenges are clicktivism (superficial online activities), exhaustion, and platform algorithm constraints.
- **Tools and Visual Messaging:** The movements can use infographics on such websites as Instagram to develop easy-to-read, visually pleasing content. This material bridges the gap between collective action frames and more personalized online action, which can be cheap. The formats facilitate learning and mobilization.

Social Media's Role in Fostering Student Engagement and Activism in Higher Education

- **Fostering Teamwork, Inspirational and Interpersonal Learning:** Through social media, students are able to connect, share ideas and collaborate irrespective of the classroom setting. Reflective activities such as WhatsApp, Google Groups, or Instagram study pages promote group discussions, peer feedback, and sharing of resources. This cooperative atmosphere enhances the level of motivation and involvement particularly in cases where students observe other students as they participate and contribute.
- **Developing Civic Awareness, Digital Activism and Social Responsibility:** Social, political and environmental issues are also constantly brought to students via social media. Awareness drives, hashtags, and campaigns assist them in being aware of the problems in the world and engaging in group action. This fosters a culture of social responsibility and civil identity, and makes the youth organized to play a positive role in bringing social change, both in the online and offline space.
- **Building on Institutional Communication and Inclusivity:** Through social media, universities communicate the news, share accomplishments and raise awareness among students, faculty and alumni. This develops a closer feeling of community and belonging. It is also a platform that gives an equal chance to different voices to be heard and instilling the institutional messages to every student regardless of whether he or she would feel disconnected.
- **Offering Forums where students can express themselves, organize and get feedback:** Social media allows students to be free expressing their views, concerns, and creating some creative work. It is used as the immediate communication tool between students and the administration, where the students leave feedback on policies and campus matters, as well as on the learning experiences. It also assists students to plan events, movements and initiatives so that they can be able to

assume active roles in their academic and social lives.

The Positive Aspects of Social Media in Engagement and Activism are

Drawing cross-studies together, the following advantages are apparent:

- **Ease of Access and Reach:** Social media is known to enable students to reach huge masses of people in a short time, such as stakeholders in various institutions, nations, or the general population.
- **Low Cost/Low Barrier to Organization:** Mobilizing or awareness raising does not typically necessitate as much money or official infrastructure.
- **The learning and support among peers are improved:** students have access to resources and can mentor one another and work informally. This aids struggling students in getting involved.
- **Motivation and Voice:** The platforms allow students to share their views and opinions, raise concerns and receive feedback. This is able to improve institutional responsibility and civic identity.
- **Innovation and Creativity:** Multimedia content, storytelling and digital activism can bring forth new possibilities of how ideas are expressed and action is taken. Institutional
- **Feedback Loop:** Social media can be used by universities to monitor student sentiment, receive feedback and become more transparent and responsive.

Challenges and Risks

Although the possible advantages are numerous, there are also a number of obstacles: Cyberbullying, Harassment and Toxicity: It may de-motivate people, stifle them, or cause mental health problems. The impact of cyber bullying undermines good association between social media use and activity or imaginativeness.

- **Misinformation and Misleading Frames:** issues can be distorted by poor verification of information, echo chambers and polarization. The students can be affected by false stories or may lose track as a result of information overload.
- **Clicktivism or Slacktivism or Online activism:** Online gestures, e.g. likes and shares, can convey the illusion of action, without actual action. This may reduce knowledge and duration of commitment. Research cautions that digital media is not a substitute of face-to-face organizing and knowledge building.
- **Inequality of Digital Access and Literacy:** Digital devices, access to internet speed, and previous digital skills are not equally available to all students. The voices that will be heard can be determined by digital divides.
- **Distraction, Time Use, Academic trade-offs:** Non-educational time spent on social media can cause a reduction in academic concentration. There is an issue of balancing involvement and distraction.
- **Algorithmic Bias and the Limits of the Platform:** Other content visible on the platform is defined by platform algorithms; emotional or sensationalized content is frequently prioritized, and less nuanced discussions are hidden. Also, there is platform policy, censorship and surveillance that can restrain some forms of activism.

Discussion

Conditions for Positive Outcomes: Based on empirical

evidence and theory, the following conditions often help promote positive engagement and activism through social media in higher education:

Table 1

Condition	Description
Institutional Support & Integration	When HEIs proactively design social media into pedagogy, student affairs, sustainability initiatives, activism programs; when educators are trained; when policies protect students.
Critical Digital Literacy Education	Teaching students to evaluate sources, understand framing, fact-check, understand algorithmic dynamics.
Hybrid Action	Combining online engagement with offline action (protests, organizing, and meetings) tends to produce more durable activism.
Safe and Inclusive Environment	Measures to reduce harassment, protect minority voices, encourage constructive discourse.
Motivational Design	Use of emotional content, storytelling, peer role models, social identity, and scaffolding to keep students motivated.
Monitoring & Feedback	Mechanisms to gauge student satisfaction, sentiment, real outcomes; build trust through action following feedback.

Conclusions concerning Higher Education Institutions:

- Policy Formulation:** The institutions must develop explicit social media policies that do not infringe on the freedom of speech and protect against harassment.
- Curriculum Design:** Incorporating of curricula modules on digital citizenship, media literacy, civic engagement into curriculums to equip students with skills to utilize social media in a responsible and efficient manner.
- Support Structures:** Provide platforms and means of student activism, including money, space, and staff mentoring. Make sure that offline action is supported.
- Partnerships:** Collaborate with the NGOs, civil society, and media to empower student voices, fact-checking and role models.
- Measurement and Research:** The local impact of social media on students in higher institutions should continuously be studied in the institutions. This involves the examination of engagement rates, activism, mental health, etc, especially in heterogenous environments.

Conclusion

There is a single-sided, yet, perhaps, an extraordinarily powerful role of social media in student engagement and activism in higher education. When applied wisely, it would help to increase academic interest, become creative, overcome communication barriers and enable students to have a more powerful voice. However, when used unchecked, abused, or unsupported, adverse effects may be formed - misinformation, superficial activism, exclusion, mental health burden.

Future Research Directions

Future studies are required to fill the following gaps

- Prospective studies of activism and engagement among students over time to determine what predictors cause continued activism.
- Cross-cultural, cross-economic, cross-regional (e.g. India, Africa, Southeast Asia) comparative studies to observe how digital divides and social/political environments

influence results.

- Experimental interventions: say, what media literacy or digital activism educational modules can make the difference in effectiveness and minimize the risks.
- More qualitative research into the way students understand their activism on the Internet, the manner in which they mediate between identity, danger, and institutional authority.
- Algorithms: how visibility of content, censorship, the policies of a platform influence the mobilization of students and learning.

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