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Social media as a double-edged sword: Influence on youth engagement in environmental activities

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Abstract

Youth's ideas on sustainability and their motivation to engage in environmental activities have changed over time. With the rising penetration of mobile phones and internet, social media influencing has become a trend where they captivate their target audience through infotainment content. Thus, through viral campaigns, informational content, and virtual community formation, these media can inspire youth to participate in sustainability efforts. Meanwhile, there exists a dark side of the medium that contributes to misinformation, superficial activism, and lack of long-term environmental commitment. This paper explores both the beneficial and detrimental shades of social media on the youth engagement in environmental activities within the frame work of social influence theory and cultural participation theory. This paper can help environmentalists, corporates, and authorities improve their communication strategies effectively and create a long-term sense of commitment in youth towards sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability, social media, infotainment, misinformation, superficial activism, long term environmental commitment

Introduction

Youth, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly, are individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, marking the transition between childhood and adulthood. This age group plays a crucial role in societal development, with many considering youth a period of growth, discovery, and transformation. According to Mohit Sharma and Shashi Punam^[1], youth are pivotal for innovation and social, economic, and political development in India. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines youth as a period of physical and psychological development from puberty to maturity. Although the Indian government initially classified youth as individuals aged 15-35 in 2006, this was revised in 2022 to the age range of 15-29. As of 2021, youth represented 27.2% of India's population, totalling around 320 million people. A study published in the *Frontline* magazine highlighted the significant influence of social media on youth, shaping their opinions and aspirations. It categorized youth into several types: Government job seekers, Migrants, Gig workers, Digital Nomads, Cosmopolitans (elite individuals seeking influencer status), and Bhakts and Vigilantes (extremists spreading hate)^[2]. Similarly, *Understanding Gen Z* by Krishnamurthy and Bijapurkar³ reveals that young people face a paradox of connection and alienation, often failing to focus on their immediate surroundings due to information overload and societal pressures. One critical question emerging from these studies is how social media engagement influences youth involvement in environmental activities. As global concerns about sustainability grow, understanding how youth engage with environmental issues, particularly through digital platforms, has become a major area of research. Factors like environmental awareness, education, personal experiences, and social ties are key to motivating youth to participate in environmental activism^[4]. Studies also suggest that youth's engagement in environmental activities provides a sense of belonging and enhances their well-being, reducing feelings of loneliness and anxiety^[5].

Furthermore, involvement in activism helps develop problem-solving skills, boosts self-competence, and promotes democratic participation^[6]. Research by McFarlane and Boxall highlighted that demographic factors such as gender, education, and financial status play a

significant role in youth's environmental behavior. Positive youth development programs, as discussed by Sydney Barnason *et al.* [7], can also foster greater civic responsibility and engagement in environmental activities. Similarly, cultural factors significantly shape how youth understand and engage with environmental issues [8]. Despite these motivating factors, challenges such as burnout can hinder sustained youth involvement in environmental activism. Cardarelli *et al.* [9] emphasize the importance of addressing multilevel barriers, including fostering meaningful relationships and understanding community needs, to ensure long-term youth participation. The concept of burnout, first introduced by Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s, has been widely recognized as a barrier to sustained engagement¹⁰. Jerasha Osberg Conner *et al.* [11] identified symptoms of burnout in youth activism, such as backlashes, savior generation pressure, and a lack of progress. They recommend ongoing support from peer and activist communities to help manage and sustain youth activism¹¹. While youth have significant potential to drive environmental change, their engagement is influenced by multiple factors. Addressing both motivational and demotivational elements, such as burnout, is essential for sustaining long-term participation in environmental activism.

Social Media and Youth Engagement on Environmental Activities: The proliferation of digital media has significantly bolstered global youth activism and awareness concerning environmental issues. Social media, in particular, offers young individuals an interactive platform to explore opportunities and challenges tied to environmental concerns. Jacques Beukes [12] highlights its pivotal role in facilitating public engagement, enabling users to comprehend local environmental issues and share real-time concerns. Beukes also emphasizes that social media empowers youth to disseminate information, raise awareness, and influence peers toward environmental consciousness. Similarly, Liao [13] identifies social media's ability to shape environmental attitudes and foster pro-environmental behavior through subjective norms. Chen and Madni¹⁴ argue that these platforms enhance environmental education, encouraging sustainable consumer choices and providing virtual spaces for dialogue and advocacy. By disseminating information, fostering community ties, and amplifying youth empowerment, social media serves as a powerful tool for environmental engagement and activism.

H₁: social media has a significant influence on the engagement of the youth in environmental activities.

Social Media and Burnout Reasons

Social media's impact on youth activism is a double-edged sword, with its potential to both engage and disengage individuals. The phenomenon of "slacktivism," as described by Lane and Dal Cin [15], reflects superficial online participation that inhibits meaningful offline actions. Similarly, Albin Zeqiri [16] highlights "clicktivism," wherein

individuals feel they contribute to environmental causes merely by clicking a button, yet fail to take impactful steps. Misinformation on climate change further undermines public engagement [17], while peer pressure moderates' disengagement behaviour¹⁸. Accessibility issues in environmental communication websites hinder participation, as noted by Mason *et al.* [19]. These barriers-misinformation, superficial engagement, peer pressure, and the digital divide-poses challenges to sustained youth involvement in environmental advocacy. Demographics could moderate the relationship between social media-driven environmental content and youth engagement, paving the way for further exploration of these dynamics.

- **H₂:** social media creates fading commitment among the youth on environmental activities overtime.
- **H₃:** Demography of the youth has a significant impact on their engagement and disengagement towards environmental activities

Theoretical Framework

Commitment to a particular activity is shaped by motivation and the internalization of individual behavior. Herbert Kelman's Social Influence Theory (1953) explains that an individual's cognition is influenced by their social context. Kelman categorized responses to social influences into three constructs: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance occurs when an individual conforms to societal norms out of fear of punishment or the desire for rewards. Identification involves feelings of guilt or shame, where acceptance is tied to belonging to a social group. Internalization, the most profound response, occurs when individuals adopt behaviors that align with their core beliefs, ensuring long-term commitment. Kelman [20] also emphasized the role of an "influencing agent" in positively guiding the social stimuli individuals experience. Subsequent researchers, such as Levy, Collins, and Nail [21], expanded on this theory by introducing concepts like obedience, informational influence, and social loafing. With the rise of online media, engagement has taken on new dimensions. Henry Jenkins' Participatory Culture Theory (1992) highlights the transformative role of digital platforms in fostering civic and economic participation. Jenkins²² asserts that social media breaks traditional boundaries between producers and consumers, enabling collaboration, skill-sharing, and decision-making. However, challenges persist, including the digital divide, superficial engagement, and misinformation. Jenkins [23] further notes that young people often struggle to distinguish credible sources from amateur ones online. Participatory Culture Theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing youth engagement in environmental activities. By examining social media's influence, it helps explore how digital platforms foster or hinder long-term commitment to sustainability. This perspective highlights both the opportunities and challenges digital engagement poses to environmental activism.

Conceptual Framework

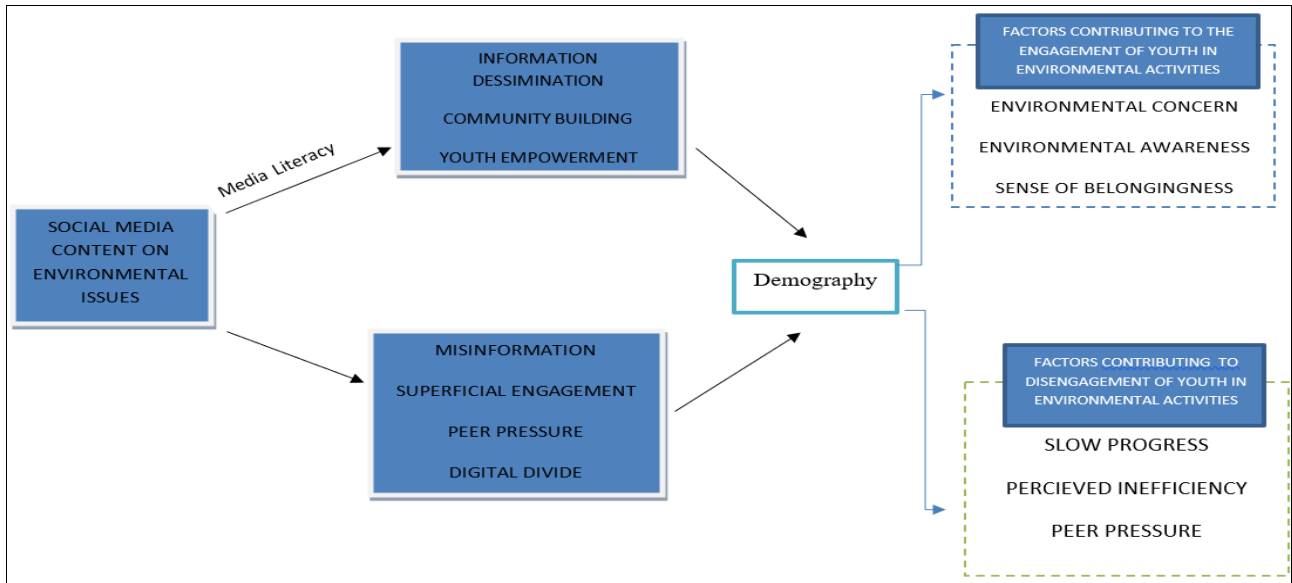


Fig 1: Conceptual framework for the study.

Methodology

The study used a cross-sectional exploratory approach to investigate the dual impact of social media on youth environmental participation. Researchers distributed a structured Google form via online platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram²⁴, collecting 169 responses through purposive sampling. The questionnaire included two sections: Part A gathered demographic details such as gender, financial status, locality, family background, and educational qualifications. It also required respondents to identify the youth category² most likely to engage in environmental

activities through social media and report their interest and participation frequency in environmental programs. Part B featured a 5-point Likert scale assessing variables like Environmental Awareness, Environmental Concern (adapted from the Revised NEP Scale, 2000), Sense of Belongingness, and Burnout Reasons. A Cronbach’s Alpha score of 0.891 confirmed the reliability of the 19-item questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS version 26.

Results and Interpretation

Table 1: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

ITEMS	Component			
	1 SBSM	2 SMBT	3 EA	4 EC
Social media plays a significant role in amplifying youth voice in environmental advocacy	.867			
Participating in environmental activities and initiatives through the online community network creates a sense of belonging	.863			
Social media enables users to connect with the like-minded individuals who are concerned on saving environment	.861			
Social media persuades the users to join in online communities focusing on environmental activities	.808			
Online communities focused on environmental activities spreads false information or biased content and create a sense of fear and anxiety		.893		
My efforts towards promoting environmental activities are ineffective through social media		.790		
I feel exhausted in trying to keep with environmental activities on social media		.770		
Being active only through online communities prevents me to involve in offline or real time environmental activities.		.716		
Social media pressurizes me to engage in environmental activities		.638		
Environmental content on social media makes me feel overwhelmed		.540		
Taking part in social media campaigns motivates youth to take environmental initiatives.			.856	
Social media is an effective platform for raising awareness about environmental issues			.702	
When humans interfere with nature, it often leads to disastrous consequences				.712

The factor analysis categorized 13 items into four main components: Sense of Belonging (Factor 1), Social Media and Burnout Reasons (Factor 2), Environmental Awareness (Factor 3), and Environmental Concern (Factor 4). Factor 1 items highlight social media’s role in amplifying youth voices in environmental advocacy (.867), fostering a sense of belonging through online community participation (.863), connecting users with like-minded individuals (.861), and persuading users to join environmental-focused communities (.801). Factor 2 items reflect challenges such

as misinformation causing fear and anxiety (.897), perceived ineffectiveness in promoting environmental activities (.790), exhaustion from engaging on social media (.770), lack of offline participation due to online activity (.716), social media pressure (.638), and feeling overwhelmed by environmental content (.540). Factor 3 emphasizes the motivational aspect of social media campaigns (.856) and their effectiveness in raising environmental awareness (.702). Factor 4 underscores the consequences of human interference with nature.

Table 2: Results of Frequency Analysis on Categories of Youth and Their Engagement Metrix

	Government Seeker		Migrants		Gig worker		Digital Nomads		Cosmos		Bhakths	
YES	19	11.2%	39	23.1%	36	21.3%	102	60.4%	66	39.1%	22	13%

The table representing the category of youth and their engagement in environmental activities shows that 60.4% of the respondents feels that Digital nomads shows more engagement towards environmental activities followed by

Cosmos (39.1%) and Migrants (23.1%). Government job seekers and Bhakths are less into environmental activities compared to other categories.

Table 3: Significance Value of the Major Engagement and Disengagement Factors with the Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	Environmental Awareness	Sense of Belongingness	Environmental Concern	Burnout Reason
Gender	.017	.003	.000	.000
Financial Status	.016	.002	.515	.000
Locality	.000	.000	.000	.000
Educational qualification	.000	.000	.003	.0065
Family Size	.420	.034	.185	.000

To analyze the influence of demographic factors on engagement with environmental content on social media, a cross-tabulation of demographic data (gender, financial status, locality, educational background, family structure) was performed alongside engagement factors such as environmental awareness, sense of belonging, environmental concern, and social media burnout. The analysis of gender and environmental awareness revealed a slight difference in the engagement levels. Specifically, 89.83% of male respondents and 87.27% of female respondents demonstrated low environmental awareness via social media. Interestingly, some female respondents exhibited moderate to high levels of awareness, which was less common among males. The chi-square test produced a p-value of 0.017, indicating a statistically significant relationship between gender and environmental awareness. Across various income groups-upper middle class (84.64%), lower middle class (88.9%), and those below the poverty line (90%)-respondents primarily exhibited low environmental awareness. However, 10% of individuals from the poverty line group displayed higher levels of awareness, suggesting that financial status might not be a sole determinant of awareness. Despite economic hardships, these respondents showed a surprising degree of environmental concern. This relationship, though, did not have a statistically significant p-value, suggesting that financial status alone does not have a major influence on environmental awareness through social media.

Locality played a more pronounced role in shaping environmental awareness. Respondents from rural areas (100%) exclusively demonstrated low awareness, while those from urban (83.72%) and metro (increasingly higher levels) areas displayed more diverse levels of awareness. The chi-square test confirmed that the difference between localities was statistically significant (p-value = 0.000),

highlighting the impact of urbanization on environmental consciousness.

Regarding educational background, respondents with higher educational qualifications (degree or higher) tended to have higher environmental awareness, while those with less formal education (matriculation) demonstrated low awareness. The p-value of 0.000 showed a significant relationship between educational level and environmental awareness, affirming that education plays a crucial role in promoting environmental consciousness through social media. The type of family structure did not seem to significantly affect environmental awareness, with both nuclear (87.26%) and joint family (100%) respondents predominantly showing low awareness. The p-value of 0.078 suggests that family structure has minimal influence on engagement with environmental issues on social media. When examining the sense of belonging that respondent felt through environmental content on social media, 59.32% of male respondents moderately supported the idea, while 49.09% of females were less likely to feel a sense of belonging. The p-value of 0.003 indicates a significant difference between genders regarding their support for the concept of belonging through environmental activities on social media. Similarly, respondents from upper and lower middle-class backgrounds (58.9% and 62.22%, respectively) showed moderate support for a sense of belonging created through social media. However, those from the poverty line showed significantly less support. A p-value of 0.002 confirmed that financial status influences the degree of support for environmental activities as a means of fostering a sense of belonging. Locality had a strong influence on perceptions of belonging, with rural respondents (51.95%) generally not supporting the concept, while urban (46.51%) and metro (100%) respondent’s demonstrated moderate support. The p-value of 0.000 signified a significant

relationship between locality and respondents' views on social media's ability to generate a sense of belonging. Educational background also shaped attitudes towards social media's ability to foster a sense of belonging. Respondents with higher secondary education or a degree (82.6% and 55.26%, respectively) showed moderate support for this concept, while those with lower education levels (matriculation, 100%) had no sense of belonging. The chi-square test indicated a significant relationship (p -value = 0.000). Regarding environmental concern, 61.02% of male respondents exhibited high concern, while female respondents generally showed lower concern. A p -value of 0.000 confirmed a significant difference between gender and environmental concern, with males expressing more concern overall. Respondents from metro areas (100%) displayed higher environmental concern, while those from rural (79.22%) and urban (84.88%) areas showed lower levels of concern. The p -value of 0.000 again indicated a significant impact of locality on environmental concern. No significant difference was found between financial status and environmental concern, as all groups (upper middle class, lower middle class, below poverty line) showed similar levels of concern. The p -value of 0.515 confirmed no significant relationship. Finally, burnout from viewing environmental content on social media varied by demographic factors. A significant gender difference was observed, with 47.15% of males and 56.36% of females reporting high levels of burnout. Financially, those in the upper and lower middle classes were more likely to experience burnout (64.10% and 64.44%, respectively), while those from the poverty line (42.50%) reported lower burnout levels. Locality also played a role, with rural (42.86%) and urban (67.44%) respondents showing higher burnout levels, and metro respondents (100%) showing moderate burnout levels. The p -value for all these categories was less than 0.05, indicating statistically significant relationships between demographics and burnout. In conclusion, demographic factors such as gender, locality, and educational background significantly influence engagement with environmental content on social media. However, financial status and family structure showed mixed results, suggesting that other unexamined variables may also be at play.

Table 4: Table on Regression Analysis for the Dependent and Independent Variables

Regression weights	R ²	F value	p-Value
EA, EC, SBSM SMBT	.066	3.897	0.010

Tables 4 presents the regression analysis results assessing the impact of Environmental Concern (EC), Environmental Awareness (EA), and Sense of Social Belonging (SBSM) on Social Media Burnout Reasons (SMBT). The R² value of 0.066 suggests that 6.6% of SMBT variance is explained by these predictors. The model is statistically significant ($p = 0.010 < 0.05$). Among the independent variables, EA has a minimal positive but non-significant effect ($p = 0.954$), while EC significantly predicts SMBT ($p = 0.010$), indicating that higher EC is linked to increased burnout. SBSM has a positive but non-significant effect ($p = 0.136$). Social media usage data show that 66.8% of respondents spend 2-4 hours daily, while 26% spend 1-2 hours, underscoring its centrality. Cross-tabulation results reveal a significant relationship ($p = 0.000$) between interest in

environmental activities and participation frequency, with over 62% of interested individuals engaging occasionally.

Major Findings

Factor analysis categorized youth engagement in environmental activities into four key factors. A sense of belonging and increased environmental awareness via social media positively influence engagement, while burnout and misinformation negatively impact participation. Among six youth categories, respondents perceive digital nomads as the most actively engaged in environmental activities, followed by Cosmos and Migrants. Government job seekers and Bhakts exhibit lower engagement levels. Demographic analysis reveals a significant relationship between environmental awareness through social media and factors like gender, locality, financial status, and education. Female respondents, metro residents, and those with higher education exhibit greater awareness. Notably, individuals below the poverty line demonstrate high environmental awareness despite financial struggles. The creation of a sense of belonging via social media varies by demographic factors. Female respondents, those below the poverty line, and individuals with matriculation or postgraduate education show lower support for this concept. Conversely, urban and metro respondents strongly endorse social media-driven belonging, highlighting the role of locality. Environmental concern differs significantly across demographic variables. Male and metro-area respondent's exhibit higher levels of concern, and educational qualification plays a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness. Social media burnout patterns indicate that female respondents experience higher burnout from environmental content. Upper and lower-middle-class respondents, as well as those from urban and metro areas, report higher burnout levels compared to rural counterparts. Individuals from nuclear families also experience higher burnout, while educational qualification does not significantly influence burnout levels. Regression analysis indicates that 6.6% of SMBT variance is explained by independent variables, with environmental concern as a key predictor. A significant relationship exists between interest in environmental activities and participation frequency. Increased interest fosters higher participation rates. Additionally, high social media usage among respondents highlights its pivotal role in communication, information sharing, and entertainment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social Media as an Influencing Agent for Youth Engagement:

The study reveals that social media is a key platform for raising environmental awareness among youth from diverse demographics. Most respondents acknowledge that social media effectively informs them about environmental issues, with significant influences observed based on educational qualification, gender, financial status, and locality. Notably, individuals experiencing financial struggles exhibit higher environmental awareness than other groups.

Additionally, social media fosters a sense of belonging by connecting like-minded individuals and facilitating participation in environmental communities. This engagement is significantly influenced by demographic factors such as gender, education, and locality. Using a modified 4-item scale based on the New Ecological

Paradigm²⁵, the study confirms that locality and education contribute to heightened environmental concern, whereas financial status does not. Social media thus plays a crucial role in promoting environmental awareness and belongingness, which, along with environmental concern, drives youth engagement in environmental activities. This finding aligns with Kelman's (1974) Social Influence Theory, where social media acts as an influencing agent, shaping attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, it resonates with Participatory Culture Theory²³, which highlights social media's interactive nature, enabling youth to create and consume environmental content. Hence, H1 is accepted.

Social Media as a Source of Disengagement

Conversely, social media can also contribute to disengagement. Many respondents feel pressured to participate in environmental activities, leading to exhaustion and burnout. The spread of misinformation and biased content creates anxiety, discouraging real-world engagement, a phenomenon known as slacktivism^[11, 10]. The study identifies significant differences in social media burnout across gender, financial status, locality, and family background, while educational qualification is not a significant factor—indicating that burnout affects individuals across all education levels. These findings align with Participatory Culture Theory, which identifies challenges such as superficial engagement, misinformation, and peer pressure^[23]. Thus, H2 is accepted.

Furthermore, the study supports MacFarlane and Boxall's^[26] assertion that demographic variables such as gender, education, and financial status influence pro-environmental behavior. The findings confirm that demographic factors significantly shape youth engagement with environmental content on social media, leading to the acceptance of H3. In conclusion, social media serves as both a catalyst and a barrier to youth engagement in environmental activities, with demographic factors playing a moderating role. NGOs, policymakers, and corporations investing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can leverage social media for targeted campaigns. By creating content that enhances environmental concern and belongingness while minimizing burnout, organizations can encourage youth participation and civic responsibility, ultimately benefiting environmental conservation efforts.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study has limitations, including the use of purposive sampling and a small sample size (<200), restricting generalizability. Additionally, it focuses only on social media's role in surface-level engagement and disengagement, without exploring behavioral change. Future research should examine pro-environmental behavior adoption and extend beyond youth to other age groups. Further studies could analyze environmental content across different social media and mainstream media platforms, considering cultural influences. A qualitative approach could enhance credibility by capturing deeper insights into youth perceptions.

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