

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIAN SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. This paper critically analyses the role of social media in Indian society, arguing that digital platforms function not merely as tools of communication but as powerful socio-technical infrastructures that reshape inequality, public discourse, culture, and governance. While the rapid expansion of affordable mobile internet and smartphones has enabled unprecedented connectivity, positioning India as one of the world's largest social media ecosystems; this growth has been deeply uneven and socially stratified. Drawing on the document's synthesis of empirical studies and policy debates, the analysis highlights a central contradiction: social media simultaneously democratizes access to information and reproduces existing hierarchies of class, gender, language, caste, and geography. The dominance of platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube has facilitated political mobilization, micro-entrepreneurship, health communication, and cultural expression, particularly through vernacular and localized digital publics. Yet these same platforms intensify misinformation, polarisation, algorithmic opacity, and surveillance, undermining deliberative democratic norms and disproportionately harming marginalized groups. Low levels of digital and media literacy, combined with multilingual complexity and weak platform accountability, further exacerbate the spread of disinformation and the fragmentation of social consciousness. Critically, the paper contends that regulatory responses in India remain reactive and fragmented, oscillating between state control and platform self-regulation without adequately safeguarding digital rights, privacy, or algorithmic transparency. From a sociological perspective, social media in India must therefore be understood as a contested arena where empowerment and exclusion coexist. Addressing this tension requires moving beyond techno-optimism toward an equity-oriented framework that integrates digital inclusion, robust media literacy, community-based knowledge production, and accountable governance. Without such structural interventions, social media risks deepening social divides even as it promises connectivity and participation.

Keywords: *social media, inequality, public discourse, digital governance, India*

Introduction

Social media has undeniably emerged as a remarkably significant and influential phenomenon within contemporary society, functioning as a vital means of communication for millions of individuals not just here, but around the globe, and profoundly affecting nearly every aspect of our lives in ways that are both transformative and pervasive, altering the very fabric of how we connect with each other on a global scale. It offers a wide array of platforms that uniquely cater to a vast range of varied forms of social interaction, which can encompass everything from casual exchanges and friendly conversations to more serious discussions and nuanced debates aimed at facilitating deeper understanding and ongoing engagement among users of all kinds, reflecting the diverse tapestry of human experiences and perspectives. This continuously expanding and evolving digital landscape exerts a profound and multifaceted influence on social dynamics, playing a crucial role in shaping and

influencing public opinion across different cultures, communities, and demographics worldwide, with consequences that frequently shape our identity and influence our worldviews. It can dramatically alter how we perceive ourselves and others in the process, creating a complex interplay of identities and viewpoints. Each interaction that takes place on these platforms not only reflects individual perspectives and voices but also possesses the inherent power to influence broader societal attitudes, opinions, and trends that can have far-reaching implications for entire communities and societies, spreading ideas and beliefs that might not have been otherwise accessible in a world that is often marked by division and misunderstanding. This significant influence, in turn, shapes how diverse groups engage with one another across various contexts and spaces, while also affecting how individuals perceive their own relationships in the unfolding context of these increasingly complex digital interactions that indeed redefine communication as we know it. In this intricate way, social media acts as both a reflective mirror to society—a mirror that highlights its complexities and diversities, while simultaneously helping to mold it into what we perceive and experience in the present day, influencing evolving norms, behaviors, and expectations that resonate on both local and global levels, showcasing the vibrant tapestry of human experience and interaction that brings to life the stories of countless individuals.

Moreover, social media has effectively facilitated the dynamic and continuous exchange of ideas, thoughts, and diverse content, as well as an array of shared personal experiences that resonate powerfully with users everywhere, significantly contributing to a shared cultural tapestry that reflects a multitude of voices and narratives representing varied backgrounds and identities. These platforms empower individuals to readily share their compelling personal stories, insightful reflections, well-considered thoughts, passionate opinions, and profound insights with others they may not have met otherwise, thereby fostering an environment that is rich in collaboration and creativity, as well as in community-building among users hailing from varied and unique backgrounds, identities that collectively enhance the richness of the discourse and knowledge shared online. This ongoing and vibrant interaction occurs seamlessly across various time zones and geographical spaces, cultivating a truly global scale of engagement that has never before been witnessed in the history of human interaction and communication, creating unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges that are both enlightening and enriching, which ultimately goes on to promote tolerance and understanding among diverse groups of people. As a result of this profound interconnectedness, social media has dramatically transformed how individuals connect, share, and engage with one another in the fast-paced, ever-evolving digital age we inhabit today, where information moves at breakneck speed and connections can transcend borders in ways that were previously unimaginable.

The impact of social media is both deep and extensive, as it has fundamentally reshaped not only how we communicate with one another but also how we perceive and understand the world around us in ways that continue to develop and evolve over time, influencing every aspect of our existence and our interactions with others in society, leading to a more interconnected global community filled with shared stories and experiences. It effectively forges connections that transcend traditional boundaries—such as geographical, cultural, and generational limits—and fosters a richly diverse sense of community on a truly worldwide scale, something that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago, as we witness a remarkable shift in how we engage with those around us and the world at large. Through these varied interactions

taking place on social media, individuals can find like-minded individuals, form friendships and supportive communities, and create expansive networks that amplify their voices, leading to increased visibility for various causes, ideas, initiatives, and movements that might otherwise remain unheard, unacknowledged, or overlooked by the wider community or the public eye, ultimately driving movements for change and progress that enhance societal development. Thus, social media is not merely a tool for communication; it is rather a transformative, catalytic force that continues to evolve and redefine interpersonal communication, connections, and social engagement for generations to come and for the future we are collectively building together as a global society. As our world continues to change and advance with technology and innovation that reshapes our daily realities, the significance of social media in our daily lives and interactions will likely become even more prominent, crucial, and critical as we navigate through this connected landscape together, fostering not just conversation but genuine understanding, acceptance, and connection among diverse individuals across the globe, creating pathways for empathy, learning, and shared growth in an increasingly interconnected world that values inclusivity and collaboration (Alimin, 2024). Simultaneously, social media's extensive use has attracted near-universal examination and analysis. In India, where social media adoption has accelerated markedly since 2010, corresponding scholarly work has only recently risen to the same level. The gap requires urgent attention, given the potential ramifications for the country's politics, economy, society, culture, and identity (Ahmad et al., 2022).

India's year-on-year increases in social media users, surpassing 400 million by mid-2021, far outstrip world averages. At the same time, access to platforms has expanded dramatically, driven by the rapid roll-out of mobile broadband, especially by the low-cost provider Jio from late 2016, and further stimulated by the pandemic. By mid-2022, about 90% of Internet users accessed social media. When the latest national survey was conducted in late 2020–early 2021, non-users projected to remain offline cited social media as the most commonly mentioned reason (Madan, 2022; Udupa et al., 2020). The sustained growth and heightened prominence of social media in India continue to reshape the public sphere and require comprehensive investigation.

Results and Discussion

Historical emergence and adoption of social media in India

Social media in India emerged in the early 2000s, with platforms such as LinkedIn, Myspace and Facebook becoming available. Only Facebook, however, gained a significant user base at that time, due in part to the low level of internet penetration and the cost of access. Social media was first used as a marketing tool by the real estate sector in 2008–2009, but the use of such websites for marketing purposes became widespread around 2011. A study showed a 31% increase in Indian companies deploying social media marketing tools from 2015 to 2016, with a total of 86% of firms using social platforms (Bukhari and Jamal, 2017). Social networking is an instinctive part of human behaviour, so the emergence of digital social interaction was to be expected. The postal system, university bulletin boards, and telephone conversations provided earlier means for people to meet, share pleasure and pain, and conduct meaningful discussions. Social networking sites extended these human networking behaviours to the virtual world (Melissa et al., 2013).

Social mediap platforms and usage patterns in Indian society

Social media platforms—most notably WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube—serve as essential channels for information dissemination and social interaction across diverse demographic segments in India (Lahiry et al., 2019). The rapid rise of these platforms can be attributed to several key factors, including the proliferation of affordable smartphones, inexpensive mobile data, the ubiquity of both wired and wireless broadband, and the elevation of government schemes and initiatives through digital platforms. Yet despite the increase in social media penetration, substantial challenges remain, such as the rural–urban digital divide and digital illiteracy, particularly when considering the fifty-five per cent of Indians (in many cases their first language) who do not understand the English language.

Encouragingly, users exhibit a growing interest in content creation and diverse content genres. Majumdar et al. (2022) identify the most widely consumed content categories: humour (used to cope); wellness (individual well-being); life skills (expanding versatility); finance (to increase savings); and politics (to improve active citizenship). Among the approximately 35 million video-sharing users, Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook emerged as the primary channels for disseminating relatable humour. Content dissemination on platforms like WhatsApp typically follows an information cascade model, influenced by the content genre: humorous content operates via majority-based models, finance-related information via linear cascades, and political messages through complex patterns involving interplay between agency and audience.

Demographic dimensions of access and engagement

Per survey data from the 2022 Internet Report, studies document access patterns across demographic dimensions such as age, gender, education, income, geography, and device ownership in India. Broadly, Internet access in India remains uneven, with younger, male, and college-educated individuals and urban areas leading adoption (Khan et al., 2022). Between 2017 and 2021, the Internet penetration rate in higher-income households outpaced lower-income households, indicating economic disparities as a barrier to access. This pattern continues regarding smartphone ownership, with 96% of urban women who completed high school owning devices compared to only 14% of rural women with a similar educational background. Mobile devices dominate access, with 93% of users employing smartphones as their primary means. The overwhelming majority of social media users employ platforms in regional languages; however, false information predominantly spreads in Hindi, English, and regional scripts. Besides literacy, the ability to interpret and critically evaluate content constitutes a key dimension of digital literacy.

Content types, information flows, and digital literacy

A distinct feature of Indian social media is the prominence of content consumption and distribution over creation and engagement. Sharing content from others is the predominant activity on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (Robinson and Schulz, 2011). Content is often disseminated not to elicit responses but merely to inform users. Many share to showcase their awareness, belief, or opinion. One of the frequent sharing types involves circulating information on contemporary developments, whether national, global, political, or social.

It is not unusual for such shares to initiate information cascades, in which users extensively share, repost, or retweet material broadly. These cascades do not necessarily entail democratic norms of deliberation; they can instead promote vitriol or malign others. Although these discussions occur publicly, most exchange takes place in private groups. Users also flow in and out of groups at high rates, seeking diverse material and managing information overload through minimal followership. The vast amount of material limits the ability to check information thoroughly, particularly when content strikes a chord with user concerns.

Discourse takes on distinct dimensions, and Indian platforms operate under significantly different conditions than those elsewhere. Indian language fluency lags behind English literacy. The prevalence of multiple official languages shapes the medium and form of dialogue. Moreover, broad public comprehension of established national and international events is not assured, which can hinder opportunities for marketable persuasion. Educational credentials or authority linked to prestigious institutions increasingly factor into credit attribution or uptake.

Digital literacy also remains low across many segments, thereby complicating interpretation. Outside the political realm, myriad opportunities for commercial language use are rising, although mainstream advertising agencies and other corporate endorsements often respect the differences between languages, dialects, and scripts.

Social media and public discourse

The rapid rise of social media platforms in India is reshaping public discourse across a wide range of topics. Leverage by a diverse spectrum of users across the country, including political leaders, professional politicians, influential public figures, various organizations, and the general public, social media has the potential to facilitate discourse on multiple fronts—such as politics, economy, education, health, news, culture, and entertainment—that is anywhere from very healthy to severely degraded. Among the millions of conversations taking place daily, significant percentage involves discussions about what is popularly termed as public discourse. Social media enables access to varying levels of public discourse in both urban and rural settings. Through the online public sphere, people can both disseminate discourse on social issues and access or engage with the discourse of other actors. Government agencies, ministries, public political leaders, and political parties activate social media platforms on a vast scale to circulate formal communications regarding social and public issues to the public. Individuals can easily access such discussions, involving a high degree of public-information dissemination and engagement.

Continuous political engagement, a vital element of public sphere access, materializes through party-affiliated mass messages, political outreach during election periods, and the sharing of graphically visual political material. Public-disinterest discourse constitutes another branch of political-related themes, including public policy, electoral systems, and government accountability. The influence wielded by everyday public personality conversations in multiple forms clearly signifies substantial engagement in the public sphere. Simultaneously, the ability of non-political actors in civil society, such as NGOs and the press, to actively engage remains crucial during these discussions. Nonetheless, extreme harshness permeates many of these public-personality discourse discussions. The normalisation of aggressive and vitriolic public discourse—primarily mediated through other mediums, like speeches and television—extensively compromises the integrity of dialogue about sensitive issues through social

media. Such mechanisms strongly prevent the participation of civil-society actors on public-system issues. Political conversation involves significant attention to politically charged issues, while widespread traces of non-public-personality discourse coexist both directly and indirectly.

Political communication and civic participation

Emerging and digital media are radically altering patterns of communication and participation in India. Social media have exploded in importance as channels for political communication. Political parties routinely use these platforms to mobilize support and engage constituents. New public-discourse, issue-framing, and citizen-engagement mechanisms enable sustained campaign strategies that were not practical prior to the rise of social media.

Media literacy, misinformation, and fact-checking

The Government of India, as part of the “Digital India” initiative, has promoted media literacy in the country through entities like UNESCO and the Central Board of Secondary Education. Government documents showcase literacy and misinformation as significant catalysts in imparting media literacy. Reportedly, 35% of adults and 20% of children encounter misinformation weekly, while four in ten individuals see it at least once monthly. Fact-checking declines as one reaches higher socio-economic groups and educational levels. Government documents highlight adults, children, and individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds as the primary targets of misinformation. Online verification methods and fact-checking account for 80% of individuals’ checking procedures yet remain low in practice. WhatsApp acts as a primary medium for spreading misinformation across all socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels, with high exposure in the southern states of India. Platform interventions emerge as the top solution in government reports, with the second being training educators and trainers for media literacy.

Misinformation and disinformation on social media harm society at large and, in the Indian context, adversely affect minorities, women, the underprivileged, and other social identities. Social media creates and enhances networks of polarised groups, thus generating conflicting information or parallel narratives even on critical social issues. Such development leads to a fractured social consciousness stemming from believing different information narratives. People across the globe witness disinformation without encountering facts. Misinformation further breeds distrust in formal information sources and deepens the divide among groups polarized around other issues. Inadequate consumer literacy encourages disinformation and misinformation to proliferate via social media. Low levels of information literacy prevent individuals from assessing the correctness of information sources. The country lacks formal verification efforts commonly found in other contexts, and efforts to train people concerning information verification or disinformation mechanisms remain scant.

Socioeconomic impacts of social media

Social media serves as a source of economic opportunities. Even though India has an insufficient physical economy, social media offers platforms where certain economic activities can be generated. Several individuals have started to voluntarily follow platforms which offer various economic opportunities. Some individuals follow for

micro-entrepreneurship and work gigs available on social media. For example, Facebook or WhatsApp has pages specifically for individuals to find work opportunities. Some physical activities are readily available in these platforms such as carpentry work, office cleaning work, and any other activity that does not require much skill. A large number individuals follow Bollywood actors and actresses and try to monetize their interest. For example, providing acting lessons, arts and crafts, motivational speeches, paintings lessons etc. The platforms that offer to monetize these interests are YouTube or Instagram. The latest trend on social media is Reels. Social media influences on certain portion of the economic sector. Health information is another sector where social media has helped greatly. Medical clinics have pages on social media where health programs are posted. Health pamphlets, health tips, and virus issues are also posted. The clinics provide instant health information, telemedicine, health consultations, and other activities in several state of India such as Nagaland. Small social stickers that associated with social issues such as picking up the plastic and other small grass roots movements have spread through these platforms.

Economic opportunities and entrepreneurship

Social media have become instrumental in developing economic prospects and entrepreneurship in India today. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok have facilitated pitch presentations to reach views globally for product launches, and several individuals on these social media earn large amounts as Micro-influencers in exchange for posting on their account. The emergence of new platforms has influenced entrepreneurs to make money trading goods from well-known companies. Digital platforms enable vendors, dropshippers, and Micro-business holders to promote their fabricating brand in various ways. These factors generate positive impacts on the economy and develop economic activities in India. Female entrepreneurs in rural areas have begun taking part in economic activities by selling creative handmade products on social media platforms.

Education, health, and social connectivity

With over 80% of the Indian population residing in rural areas, and a significant number of people still being illiterate, it is imperative to find effective and impactful educational solutions for this demographic. Different initiatives have been taken in educational technology and tele-education to bridge the educational gap between rural and urban areas. The use of social networking sites (SNS), which involve interaction and discussion among the participants in a network through the exchange of information, has been increasing significantly, especially in the younger population. Access to the internet has been increasing, especially among students, and their interaction continues to evolve. Different SNS tutorials are now available in multimedia form that can better attract attention and promote learning. Textbook notes can be shared in a faster manner over SNS and multimedia can be incorporated also in Whatsapp. In the health sector also, telemedicine has improved a lot and the doctor-patient communication is also done over SNS. Services like online consultations are now available and patients also seek medication information over these channels. The stresses of professional and academic life may lead to social estrangement (excluded from society) and the resultant loneliness and work-stress could be reduced by communicating in a social network. Many people have now started sharing problems

over a social networking site (SNS) and are discussing them, which tremendously increases their mental health. Out of many platforms if one tries to be a good influence for youth to shed their social complex and pursue their dreams, action must take immediately. Communal games, entertainments, group language sharing etc. plays a major role while considering this platform of communication.

Social media, culture, and identity

As major social media platforms gain traction in India, online users are increasingly engaging with cultural artifacts and products. A burgeoning body of work traces the emergence of diverse cultural subcultures on these platforms. Far from being merely the domain of the elite, the middle class has become a focal point of cultural engagement among users sharing similar tastes. As social media influence grows, questions about cultural authenticity arise and discussions about the true significance of Hindutva (Indian cultural nationalism) become fraught. Informal social networks, displaying a high degree of interactivity have emerged, extending the reach of local culture, producing localized music videos that travel across the country. Users define such vernacular alternatives for the country or rural spaces and engage enthusiastically with them. Small producers of cultural content circulate materials beyond their immediate social circles, drawing on extended networks for circulation or local cultural frames of reference, a phenomenon termed a substantial vernacular public sphere. Individuals from diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds now rely on social media sites to discuss, negotiate, and build their surrounding cultural framework through informal conversations online, sidestepping mainstream channels dominated by national media and political elites, emerging with substantial power to influence contemporary culture. Major themes among the emerging cultural commodity system include a rise in local creativity, the collision or hybridization of kitsch and folk traditions, politically charged cultural productions, remixing or repurposing through digital tools and new styles reflective of a generation grappling with post-colonial issues. The local identity is now constructed through social networks rather than state discourse and a distinctive cultural politics rather than a national harmony emerges.

Language use, representation, and cultural norms

The Indian social media landscape covers various phenomena that merit analysis. Multilingual content is a key aspect of linguistic diversity on the web; Indo-English serves an increasingly important need for users. Mixing scripts is common, switching between Roman and indigenous scripts. Online representation reflects societal norms and cultural stereotypes. Indian social media users frequently contest or reinforce existing stereotypes; major influences include intersectional positioning and belonging to user communities. Attention to gendered stereotypes informs support for feminist movements and gendered content production, while national representations draw on notions of inclusivity or exclusion pertaining to particular religious communities. Indian speakers of English, along with those possessing higher degrees and more urban-acquired qualifications, emerge as more visible on social media. Supreme Court intervention thus holds implications for broader societal flexibility and rigidity, along the lines of public approval and legitimacy.

Social movements and collective action

The emergence of social media has transformed the landscape of social movements in India, allowing activists to organize and mobilize large groups on a scale not seen before. The level of accessibility and affordability of social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp has promoted the development of alternative media through which ideas about issues like the wage gap and work-life balance circulate, broadening consumer awareness in a way that mainstream media cannot. While social media offers opportunities for the strategic use of space, time, and tools to amplify existing movements even in the face of repression, organizations must carefully negotiate and balance online and offline engagements to avoid the risks of reduced participation, digital surveillance, and repressed speech.

Regulation, policy, and governance

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector including Internet and telecommunication plays a key role in transforming the growth and development of emerging economies like India. The tremendous growth of digital economy in emerging economies from Government digitization initiatives, MSME aggregation on various e-commerce platforms and online education are few instances which can be under taken. Without a doubt, social media platforms, in today's scenario provide several opportunities to the users in enhancing their socio-economic conditions. Thus, it is necessary to growth of these platforms and enhance their outreach to the lower strata people in semi urban and rural geography. Many issues related to regulation, policy, and governance are discussed, including institutional politics, criminal activities, entertainment, and social media influence. Several policy options are analyzed for feasibility and stakeholder impact, such as independent institutional regulation, self-regulation, government regulation, platform regulation, and doing nothing. These options vary in political, administrative, social, technological, economic, and legal feasibility. Stakeholders impacted include interest groups, the public, social media platforms, government, news media, and digital advertising firms.

Platform accountability and data governance

Social media companies adopt an ad-hoc approach towards platform governance in India. Absence of widely applicable standards is evident in varied terms of service, privacy policies, and data localisation stipulations across platforms. Media platforms play a major role in information dissemination, shaping discussions and framing narratives in the public sphere without a mechanism for redress. Terms of service regulate matters from network neutrality and data protection to algorithm transparency, with redress mechanisms log files and system reports often not accessible to users. All major platforms retain the option of suspending or terminating the account without assigning reason or justification, leaving users unassured of platform accountability.

Algorithmic transparency remains an elusive goal, with platforms providing little knowledge of processes used to curate content. Detailed data compliance guidelines on user generated data remain absent, rendering compliance checks impractical and hampering informed consent. While data storage lies within India, the absence of public protocols on the creation and deletion of unwanted data raises concerns. Algorithms preserve content posted while amplifying promoted and reshared content beyond user's control. Such lapses perpetuate the digital footprint of users without awareness and curtailing an off-boarding option. Data-location requirements generate cross-platform

regulation leading users to disengage, impeding the possibility of temporary deactivation or city migration once data creation is completed. Inconsistent compliance with equally absent grievance mechanisms precludes the establishment of a public-issue based account.

Digital rights and privacy

The Indian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression, restricting it only under circumstances of public order and communications confidentiality. Legislative measures enacted to digest and enforce this right includes the Information Technology Act (IT Act) of 2000, amended in 2008 and 2019. It grants the Indian government the authority to restrict access to content that it deems unacceptable and to prosecute violators. The Indian Supreme Court ruled in 1995 that privacy is subsumed within Article 21 of the Constitution, along with the right to technology, but the Constitution does not explicitly furnish the right to privacy. Accordingly, the Supreme Court determined in 2017 the right to privacy does form a fundamental right protected under Article 21. Digital data are a combination of messages, personal lifestyle data, objective facts, existing beacons, photographs, videos, recorded sounds, and many other forms of content. Data protection is on everyone's mind. Whereas some social platforms seek to imbibe data in individuals for marketing, others design facilitate conversions through data architecture or quell mass gathering data vectors to disallow a "sensitive" zone. When and how society grants assignment of data ownership depends on role, regulation, and enforcement. Legislation permitting acquiring, exchanging, or processing these kinds of tactile-conceivables on people still requires debate. Without any such clear guidelines in place, public authorities will continue hold the power of sovereign authority. Moreover, processes of using private data occur without individual involvement or even open local dissemination. A fast-forward player incorporates a character conversion generating star on film scenario becomes a riskier alternative in advertisement sector. Everyone signals he/she is ready to be coached privately whenever converted in nowadays.

Emerging research on social media in India engages with a variety of scholarly traditions, reflecting the nation's diverse political, economic, cultural, and religious contexts. Inquiries into social media's linkages to public discourse, civic participation, and disinformation engage with theories of the public sphere and communication infrastructure. Studies addressing economic impacts, cultural practices, and collective action tendencies draw on political economy, postcolonial communication, and cultural studies, respectively. These frameworks illuminate the implications of social media platforms for existing socioeconomic inequalities and marginalization and highlight avenues for counter-resistance and collective mobilization. Within each domain, scholarship articulates and interrogates the assumptions embedded in specific configurations of engagement in order to explore both emergent possibilities and the countervailing pressures that seek to limit them.

Quantitative analytics and survey methods

Methodological rigor is crucial for analyzing social media's multifaceted role in India. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have generated important insights. Automatic tweet categorization, dynamic network metrics, and sentiment analysis of national hashtags during elections show how social media shapes discourse and civic

engagement. Polling the general population on preferred platforms, usage motives, and perceived benefits illuminates user experience at larger scale. Combining these methods enables effective mapping of platforms and usage patterns alongside discourse analysis and estimation of effects. India is witnessing rapid adoption of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. An initial step in studying these media is to analyze usage data and connectivity patterns. Selecting a representative sample of users and developing automatic metrics that characterize network connections allows for the construction of social graphs and dynamic analysis of user behavior over time. Such data can indicate how usage is linked to road safety, civic engagement, and health issues. Information on educational background, urban-rural categorization, literacy, and language further specifies the population under analysis.

Qualitative and ethnographic perspectives

In recent years, the proliferation of online platforms has attracted heightened interest and scrutiny. Young researchers and seasoned scholars alike are engaging with diverse themes and questions, motivated by the urgency of the socio-technical moment and the relevance of their empirical and theoretical concerns. Emerging generative models such as ChatGPT have further intensified these developments. A variety of approaches are being adopted, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method perspectives. Emergent applications of artificial intelligence (AI), such as large language models, deepfakes, and image generators, have raised pressing questions. Models of data accumulation, regulation, accountability, and governance continue to be scrutinised and contested. Cycles of hope and despair, disruption and consolidation, characterise the technological landscape. Amid the plethora of observations, assertions, perspectives, and predictions, a somewhat fragmented and disparate scholarly literature on the subject of social media in India remains available.

Although social media emerged in India shortly after the turn of the millennium, interest among academics only began to gather momentum approximately a decade later. Contemporary scholarship draws inspiration from diverse disciplinary traditions, including information studies, sociology, political science, media studies, anthropology, and communication studies, heating a lively but unevenly developed and often derivative conversation. Attention is directed to platform adoption, public discourse, culture, economy, politics, governance, and separatism. Engaging with multiple theoretical traditions, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches, researchers have addressed a variety of broader themes, among them nation, identity, citizenship, representation, privacy, and safety.

Though the overarching interest appears relatively broad, much of the empirical focus has been concentrated on specific platforms (notably WhatsApp and Facebook) and on metropolitan contexts. Attention to semi-rural and rural regions, to user experiences and practices, and to platforms such as YouTube, ShareChat, Instagram, and TikTok remains comparatively scarce. While sociological and ethnographic perspectives are broadening the analytical scope, a predilection for quantification, measurement, metricization, and big data still prevails. Ethnographic engagement with user experience, content and practice indexing, participation in circulating material, fieldwork, and digitally mediated interviews across diverse environments and over extended periods are proving illuminating.

Conclusion

Challenges and future trends

The potential of social media as an instrument for promoting socio-economic equality in India remains unfulfilled. The rural-urban divide persists across multiple dimensions such as access and affordability, content relevance and language, and digital literacy. A large social media gap still exists among the poor and uneducated, who tend to engage less on platforms perceived to be for the elite. Government schemes to promote digital inclusion should ensure that low-income and rural populations are able to fully participate in the digital economy. AI tools will impact the nature of social media consumption and the digital economy globally. LLMs and other emerging technologies, like deepfakes, increase the need for media literacy in evaluating information. AI- and ML-driven smart platforms will promote hyper-personalized content, amplifying existing biases and reshaping cultural norms. Evaluation from multiple socio-cultural perspectives can help ensure that platforms preserve and promote essential human capabilities.

Digital inclusion and the rural-urban divide

Despite the growth of internet access in India, substantial disparities persist between urban and rural areas, limiting participation in the digital economy and online social media. Major obstacles include geographical distribution of infrastructure, affordability of services, and digital literacy. In rural areas of India, only 26 percent of the population accesses the internet compared to 66 percent for urban dwellers. Moreover, the gender gap is wider in rural than urban (38 percent) contexts. Even when devices are available, lack of knowledge about how to use them limits engagement. Consequently, rural communities tend to use social media less frequently than urban populations, limiting access to up-to-date health notices and government information. Access remains inequitable for poorer and marginalized groups. Considerable inequalities based on caste, class, gender, and location affect the scope and quality of digital participation and the social media landscape across the country.

Emerging technologies and their social implications

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) systems—especially generative AI capable of creating text, images, audio, and video—shows great promise for future societal transformation and productivity growth but also raises important social concerns in countries such as India. Concerns span from the amplifying of misinformation and disinformation, the sharing of harmful, adult, and objectionable content, as well as emerging privacy issues such as bulk data collection and surveillance. Young Indians favour openness on social media but prefer privacy on chat platforms. Government studies reveal a high prevalence of unverified, misleading, and spuriously branded content. Women, the youth, and rural populations experience significant online harassment, and a large portion of people using social media encounter harmful or adult content. For the future, consideration should be given to AI-enabled tools that could address security, safety, and privacy concerns without infringing upon civil liberties and fundamental rights.

The emergence of social media marks a revolutionary change in the patterns of communication and societal interaction. Social media facilitates online communication

in real-time, enabling the rapid sharing of thoughts, experiences, and information. It is integral to the present generation's social fabric, shaping society, politics, and social movements. Social media emerged in the West around 1985, with Orkut, a social networking site founded by Orkut Büyükkökten of Google, first introduced in India in 2004. Although the site quickly attained popularity, Facebook, launched in 2004, soon became the preferred platform worldwide and in India. After several hurdles, Indian startups began to establish their footing, with social media emerging in 2009 across diverse platforms. The history of social media in India follows linguistic, geographic, and other dimensions while being strongly influenced by the broader socio-political economy of the country. Multiple events, often interlinked at different levels and in several dimensions, affected both the emergence and adoption of social media nationwide. A prominent feature of Indian social media history is the rapid pace of evolving preferences for both social networking sites and instant messaging apps, with a shift from Facebook and Orkut to the two mobile app-based platforms, WhatsApp and Instagram.

India enjoys the world's second-largest online population and ranks third worldwide in terms of social media users. Social media user statistics for India show that the country possessed 467 million accounts in January 2022. India boasted a phone penetration of 88% across a spectrum of mobile devices in early 2021, surpassing the worldwide average of 46%. India housed more than 650 million Internet users in June 2021, translating to an Internet penetration rate of 47.5%, again exceeding the worldwide average of around 50%. However, substantial disparities in social connectivity persist within the online Indian population.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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