

Empowered by Pixels: Exploring the Intersection of Social Media Use and Activism Among College Students in Kerala

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Abstract

This study explores social media activism among college students in Kerala, focusing on their social media preferences, communication strategies, and the correlation between social media use and activism. Employing a quantitative research methodology, data were collected from 500 college students across Kerala using a stratified random sampling method. The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire, which underwent a pilot test to ensure reliability and validity.

Results indicate that Instagram is the most preferred platform for activism, chosen by 51.4% of respondents, followed by WhatsApp and YouTube, each with 15%. Videos emerged as the favoured communication strategy, preferred by 33.2% of students, followed by images at 27.4%. The correlation analysis reveals a significant positive relationship between social media use and social media activism ($r = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that increased social media usage is associated with higher levels of activism online. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of social media activism among college students in Kerala, highlighting the pivotal role of Instagram and video content in their activism efforts. The positive correlation between social media use and activism underscores the potential of social media as a tool for mobilizing youth towards social and political causes.

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Key Words

Social Media Activism, communication strategies, social media use, preferred platforms

Introduction

In the contemporary digital age, the proliferation of social media platforms has dramatically transformed the landscape of political and social activism (Cammaerts, 2015). These platforms, characterized by their accessibility, speed, and reach, have become integral to how individuals, especially the younger demographic, engage with political and social issues. The advent of social media has introduced a new dimension to civic engagement, offering unprecedented opportunities for the dissemination of information, mobilization of individuals, and collective action (Gerbaudo, 2012). Unlike traditional media, social media platforms facilitate real-time communication and interaction, allowing users to share content, express opinions, and organize events with minimal barriers. This democratization of information flow has empowered individuals to participate in political discourse and activism in ways that were previously unimaginable. The ease of access to diverse viewpoints and the ability to connect with like-minded individuals globally has fostered a more engaged and informed citizenry (Rideout & Watkins, 2019).

College Students' Activism in the Digital Age

Students have emerged as a significant driving force behind Social Media Activism, using online venues to magnify their voices and promote various issues. Their enthusiasm for social media may be due to the intrinsic qualities of the platforms, which are consistent with the attitudes and practices of the younger generation. Social media gives students various opportunities to interact, engage, and express themselves without restraint, enabling the quick dissemination of knowledge and mobilisation (Scherman et al., 2015). Students in the contemporary generation, who are digital natives, are skilled at navigating the virtual world and can use hashtags, viral stuff, and visual storytelling to grab people's attention and start debates about social, political, and environmental issues (Byrne et al., 2021). The significance of studying student activism in the digital age can be attributed to its wide-ranging impact on politics, technology, society,

and the dynamics of social change. Student activism often shifts views, regulations, and cultural norms as a social change catalyst (Jacoby, 2017). Technological advances have changed debates about politics and the way subjects gain attention. Enhancing media literacy and digital citizenship among young people can be accomplished by researching student activism in the digital age. It promotes critical thinking about how technology might be used for social change and awareness of the dangers that may lurk, like fake information and privacy issues (Gammon & White, 2011). Social media offers the younger generation a platform for traditionally marginalised voices to be heard. Analysing student activism on digital platforms can show how these platforms empower minority and marginalised groups to confront structural injustices, bring attention to their concerns, and demand change. The digital era has made global connectivity possible, enabling cross-border collaboration among student activists (Y. Hutchinson et al., 2023).

In the context of Kerala, a state known for its high literacy rates and political awareness, understanding how college students use social media for activism can shed light on broader trends and implications. This demographic is particularly significant as they represent the future of political engagement and have unique perspectives shaped by their digital nativity. By examining their social media use, preferences for platforms, and communication strategies, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on digital activism and its potential to shape the political landscape.

Review of Literature

One of the most significant issues to look into in light of the tremendous rise in the use of social media is how it affects participation in politics. It becomes clear that many important questions arise when we learn more about this subject. Researches first focused on the isolating impacts of personal computers, but with the introduction and widespread use of smartphones, the focus has changed to the pervasiveness of these gadgets. As a result, a common worry in changing media landscapes is the possibility of disengagement and the ensuing imbalance in political participation. However, when we delve further into this complicated topic, it is crucial to consider various elements and viewpoints that can help us understand the connection between political participation and the use of social media (Hooghe & Oser, 2015).

Norris (2000) proposed three relevant theories in media effects research, particularly regarding media use and political participation. These frameworks illuminate this complex relationship. The first framework, “mobilisation,” suggests that media use motivates political participation. Thus, media consumption can encourage political participation. The second concept, “reinforcement,” holds that political participation increases media use. The idea suggests that politically involved people are more inclined to consume media that matches their views. The third framework, a “virtuous circle,” portrays media consumption and political participation as reciprocal. Thus, media consumption and political engagement reinforce each other. Politics-related media increases political interest and participation. Their political activity increases their political media consumption, supporting the cycle.

The mobilisation theory, a significant perspective on social media and political participation, holds that platforms mobilise those with low political engagement to become more politically active. This theoretical framework posits that social media might inspire political participation by exposing consumers to political knowledge. Social media platforms provide a low-effort entry into social issues, which might encourage political participation. For instance, signing an online petition may inspire people to attend public marches or join grassroots movements (Edgerly et al., 2018).

The reinforcement theory posits that social media use strengthens the political activism of individuals actively involved in politics. People with a genuine interest in and engagement with politics often leverage social media platforms to deepen their understanding and enhance participation. They may utilize online resources to stay informed about current events, follow political discussions and debates on social media, or actively seek alternative viewpoints to broaden their perspectives (Schlozman & Verba, 2010).

The virtuous circle theory holds that social media’s mobilisation and reinforcement effects are reciprocal and identical in power. This paper claims that social media use might create a self-reinforcing cycle of mobilisation and reinforcement, increasing political participation and engagement. Social media may mobilise people by spreading knowledge, encouraging collective action, and organising political movements. Digital networks provide quick mobilisation and political message amplification. Social media also supports political activists by

engaging and supporting them. Social media can help political participants find like-minded people and solidify their beliefs. Online networks and platforms may encourage, validate, and strengthen political activism (Moeller & Shehata, 2018).

The following research objectives are proposed to understand more about social media activism in Kerala.

1. To identify the social media preferences of college students in activism.
2. To understand the communication strategies of college students in activism.
3. To identify the relation between students' social media use and social media activism.

Methodology

This paper employs a quantitative research methodology to investigate the correlation between social media use and social media activism among college students in the state of Kerala. To ensure the inclusion of diverse colleges across Kerala, a stratified random sampling method is utilized. Stratification involves categorizing the target population, specifically college students, into distinct subgroups based on relevant factors such as geographical location, type of institution, and academic disciplines.

The state of Kerala is divided into three zones for the purposes of this research: Northern Kerala, Southern Kerala, and Central Kerala. The Northern zone includes the districts of Kasargode, Kannur, Malappuram, Wayanad, and Kozhikode. The Southern zone comprises the districts of Trivandrum, Kollam, Alappuzha, and Pathanamthitta. Central Kerala encompasses the districts of Palakkad, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Idukki. Two districts from each zone were selected for the study: Wayanad and Kozhikode from the North, Palakkad and Ernakulam from the Central region, and Trivandrum and Kollam from the South.

Within each selected district, three colleges representing urban, semi-urban, and rural settings are chosen. Participants are then selected using random sampling within each stratum, ensuring a representative sample. A total sample size of 500 participants is deemed sufficient to achieve statistical significance and ensure the generalizability of the findings.

The primary data collection instrument for this study is a structured questionnaire. The survey consists of close-ended questions specifically designed to assess variables related to social media activism, social media use, and demographic characteristics of the participants.

Before full-scale implementation, the questionnaire undergoes a pilot test to evaluate its reliability and validity. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality, are strictly adhered to prior to data collection. Participants are approached either through face-to-face interactions or via digital channels, depending on their availability and preference. They are provided with clear instructions regarding the study's objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation. Sufficient time is given to participants to complete the survey, and data collection is conducted within a designated timeframe to minimize bias and ensure consistency in responses.

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire survey is subjected to statistical analysis using appropriate methods. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, are calculated to identify social media preferences and communication strategies. Inferential statistics, primarily correlation analysis, are employed to examine the relationship between social media activism and social media use among college students in Kerala. Data analysis is facilitated using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), ensuring precision and efficiency in handling large datasets.

Theoretical Framework

The study uses Technological Optimism as the theoretical framework. It is the idea that technology, including digital tools and platforms, may improve society and bring about favourable changes. It includes the notion that technology can empower people, improve communication, and support societal advancement (Danaher, 2022). It is an approach to highlight the potential of social media technologies to address social issues ranging from local grassroots problems to global problems of climate change. Even though techno-optimists acknowledge the challenges associated with social media, they see social media as a catalyst for the positive transformation of society and as an optimistic view of their potential for change. One of the key proponents of the approach is the Spanish

Sociologist Manuel Castells. He strongly supports the notion of social media's potential to advance social activism in his book "Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age". He argues that in the information society, power lies in the hands of techno-savvy people who can connect and mobilise social movements.

Results

Table 1. Most preferred social media platform for activism

	Frequency	Per cent
Facebook	54	10.8%
Instagram	257	51.4%
WhatsApp	75	15.0%
YouTube	75	15.0%
Telegram	16	3.2%
Twitter	23	4.6%
Total	500	100.0

The above table shows the social media preferences of the student samples in Kerala for activism. Instagram stands out as the predominant social media platform, garnering a substantial majority (51.4%) of students choosing it for activism. The overwhelming preference of Instagram indicates that its visual-centric and interactive features resonate effectively with college students in Kerala. WhatsApp and YouTube are equally favored by (15%) of the sample students for activism. About (10.8%) of the participants prefer Facebook as their most preferred medium for activism. Almost (4.6%) of participants favor Twitter, and (3.2%) choose Telegram.

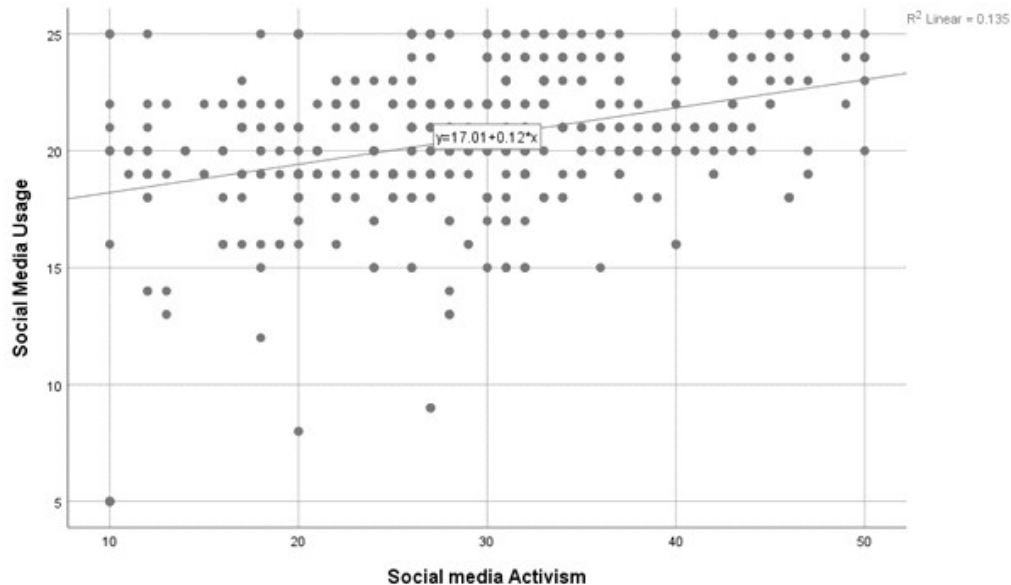
Table 2. Most Preferred Communication Strategy for Activism among the College Students of Kerala

	Frequency	Per cent
Hashtags	55	11.0%
Images or Photographs	137	27.4%
Videos	166	33.2%
Infographics	17	3.4%
Memes	78	15.6%
Online petitions	2	.4%
Online Money Donation	6	1.2%
Updating/Sharing text Status	39	7.8%
Total	500	100.0

The above table shows the most preferred communication strategies of the sample students for activism. Participants choose videos (33.2%) as their most preferred communication strategy for activism. It is closely followed by images/pictures (27.4%). About (15.6%) of the respondents support memes. Almost (11%) of the participants prefer hashtags above the other communication strategies. Only (7.8%) of the participants prefer the traditional text status for activism. Infographics (3.4%), online money donations (1.2%), and online petitions (0.4%) are the least preferred communication strategies among the participants.

Table 3. Correlation between Social Media Use and Social Media Activism

	N	r	P value
Social Media Use	500	0.367	.000
Social Media Activism			

Graph 1. Correlation between Social Media Use and Social Media Activism

Correlation between Social Media Use and Social Media Activism displays the relationship between the variables of Social Media Use and Social Media Activism. The correlation coefficient (r) of 0.367 indicates a positive correlation between Social Media Use and Social Media Activism, which is a substantial correlation. The result suggests that as Social Media Use increases, the tendency to engage in Social Media Activism also increases.

Discussion

Instagram is the most preferred Social Media platform for activism among Kerala college student respondents, followed by WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. Telegram and Twitter are less preferred among students for activism. The surveyed students overwhelmingly chose Instagram, with 51.4% of respondents selecting it as their first preference for activism. The increased popularity of Instagram for activism aligns with the findings of the study done by Cort and his team (Cort et al., 2021). The interactive features on Instagram, such as stories and reels and its visual focus, make it a good fit for today's college students' preferences and communication methods. The platforms emphasise sharing

images, videos, reels, stories and creative content so users can express themselves and connect with peers in a visually appealing way. The importance of visual content and individual expression in college students' digital lives is highlighted by this popularity.

With 15.0% of students choosing WhatsApp and YouTube as their preferred mediums for activism, the importance of these platforms for activism is evident. WhatsApp's success underlines the messaging service's vital impact on one-on-one and group communications. Due to its broad appeal and privacy features, students may find it helpful for effectively disseminating messages relating to activism. The use and relevance of WhatsApp with regard to Social Media Activism are consistent with many previous studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Milan & Barbosa, 2020; Pang & Woo, 2020). YouTube is as popular as WhatsApp, with 15.0 % demonstrating its importance in activism. Students may use it for its instructional content and advocacy efforts beyond simply providing entertainment. With the help of visuals, narratives, and graphics, students can use YouTube's video forms to communicate complicated ideas in ways that are easy to understand. Additionally, it gives them the freedom to produce and distribute content about activism, which enhances their engagement on a more personal level. Our results reaffirm the findings of (Hutchinson, 2019; Lim & Golan, 2011; Tortajada et al., 2020) regarding the widespread use and effectiveness of YouTube for activism.

The study reveals that only 10.8% of respondents prioritize Facebook for activism. However, Facebook used to be the dominant player in the recent social media landscape and activism. Its decline in preference among the students suggests a shift in their online engagement and priorities. Facebook's decline as a preferred medium for activism contradicts the findings of (Lee et al., 2015; Özkula et al., 2023) and reaffirms the results of (Cort et al., 2021). The platform's relatively static interface and association with an older demographic may have contributed to its waning appeal among the younger generation. The decline emphasizes the need for platforms that offer dynamic and engaging experiences to capture the attention of college students.

A significantly smaller number of college students give primary preference to Twitter (X) and Telegram for activism, with rates of 4.6% and 3.2%, respectively. Those who desire quick and current information may be drawn to Twitter's

concise style and real-time updates. Our results challenged the prevailing assumptions based on studies that proposed the extensive usage of Twitter for political engagement and activism (Fernández & Rodríguez-Virgili, 2019; Malik et al., 2019). On the contrary, our study indicates that only a few percent of respondents preferred Twitter for activism. Users concerned with data protection and safe communication concerning activism may be drawn to Telegram by its privacy and security emphasis. These platforms cater to particular requirements and interests within the varied social media interaction landscape, albeit not being as extensively used. The finding contrasts with the earlier works of Liu and Morris, which signifies the vital role of Telegram in activism (Liu, 2021; Morris, 2023). Given the prevalence of aesthetically appealing platforms like Instagram and the versatility of WhatsApp and YouTube, it is clear that a multimedia and interactive strategy is essential for successfully reaching the younger generations. Furthermore, Facebook's declining appeal among college students highlights the necessity for platforms to develop and adjust to shifting user expectations.

Regarding Communication Strategies, the student respondents think that Videos are the most effective communication strategy for activism, followed by Images, Memes, and Hashtags. Only a few respondents prefer Text status updates, Infographics, Online Petitions and Online Money Donations for activism. Videos are now widely recognised as practical tools for delivering compelling stories, and the popularity of videos among the students in the survey is consistent with the general trend of the prominence of visual content in online communication. Videos are more common in students' Social Media Activism initiatives because of their capacity to communicate emotions, share personal experiences, and explain complex subjects. The video of the death of George Floyd as a part of police brutality and the subsequent Black Lives Matter campaign in the United States shows the power of videos to garner public sentiments and attention. Images or photographs were also extensively employed, with almost one-third of participants incorporating these visual elements into their activism. Visual content, by nature, tends to attract attention and evoke emotional responses, which can be particularly effective in conveying messages related to societal issues and mobilizing support. Our results collaborate with the trends highlighted in investigations (Fernández, 2020; Kiziltunali, 2020; Young, 2021), highlighting the importance of visual content as a communication strategy for activism.

Similarly, the widespread use of memes demonstrates how humour and satire are incorporated into Social Media Activism, which is recognised for engaging audiences while addressing critical issues. Memes can be creatively used to make exciting campaigns. Various troll pages in Kerala, like the *International Challu Union* and *Troll Malayalam*, use memes to support their causes and for social activism. Keeping the previous assumptions of Baker et al. and Moreno Almeida, our findings also signify the widespread acceptance of memes as an effective tool for activism (Baker et al., 2019; Moreno-Almeida, 2021).

Some respondents prefer hashtags and text status updates in activism. But compared to multimedia tactics, the priority is low, indicating a shift from the traditional textual activism of earlier eras. This change is consistent with broader changes in communication techniques, with digital venues supporting novel forms of expression and participation. The effectiveness of hashtags as a communication strategy for activism has been identified in many studies (Clark, 2016; Dadas, 2014). Likewise, contrary to the findings, many studies were critical of the effectiveness of hashtags in activism (Zulli, 2020). Still, we cannot explicitly deny the relevance of hashtags in activism. In contemporary activism, along with multimedia content, users are also posting hashtags. The hashtags will not only help increase the reach of the campaign but also create uniformity for activism on social media.

It is interesting to note that the results demonstrate the importance of several additional communication tactics, including infographics and online petitions. Infographics can be used as instructional tools to raise awareness about various causes since they visually simplify complex material. Using infographics for activism aligns with the findings of the research done by Sweeny (Sweeny, 2023). The sparse preference for online petitions and money donations may point to an early stage of social media activism among students, which is calling for more research to determine the factors driving their uptake. The lower preference for online petitions for activism aligns with the (Morva, 2016) findings. The finding also implies the concept of feel-good virtual activism called slacktivism, which involves little commitment and effort. Another possible reason for the low preference for online money donations may be the lack of financial independence among students.

One of the most crucial study objectives was to check the relationship between students' social media use and social media activism. The results indicated a strong positive correlation between social media use and social media activism. The results suggest that students who use social media more for diverse purposes are more likely to participate in social media activism. Bakker & de Vreese (2011) have identified similar results regarding Internet use and political participation, confirming that Internet use may lead to political engagement online. Hoffmann and Lutz (2021) also identified that internet use is positively associated with online political communication. Valenzuela (2013) validated the positive relationship between social media use and protest behaviour. Previous findings of (Lee et al., 2017; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) supported the relationship between social media use and protest activities. The positive correlation between social media use and online political participation is supported by (Boulianne et al., 2020). Tang and Wen (2023) identified a positive relationship between social media use and online political engagement among university students, aligning with our study findings. In essence, the collective evidence from these studies underscores a consistent pattern: a strong and affirmative association between students' usage of social media for various purposes and their active involvement in social media-based activism. This evidence indicates that a greater interest in and dedication to participating in online activism and political engagement activities appears to be fostered by higher engagement with social media platforms. Although these results highlight a substantial relationship, they do not prove a direct causal connection, highlighting the need for more investigation to delve deeper into the complexities of this interaction. The results demonstrate a strong foundation for the techno-optimism that identifies the crucial role of social media technology in social activism.

Conclusion

The study underscores the significance of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, and communication strategies like video content in fostering activism among college students in Kerala. The research identifies an evolving nature of platform preferences and communication strategies among the young people for activism. Platforms like the Facebook and Twitter, once very influential among the activists now decline for the purpose of activism. Likewise tweets commonly used as a vehicle for activism is also declining. The results will help

the communication strategists and activists who mobilise support for their cause using social media. The positive correlation between social media use and activism suggests that as students engage more with these platforms, their involvement in social causes intensifies. This research not only highlights the pivotal role of social media in contemporary activism but also underscores its potential as a powerful tool for mobilising youth toward social and political issues. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of digital activism, particularly within the youth demographic in Kerala.

Scope for Future Research

Future research could explore the evolving role of emerging social media platforms like Threads, which were not included in this study, to understand their potential impact on activism among college students. Additionally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the motivations and barriers that students face when engaging in social media activism, offering a more nuanced understanding of their behaviours and preferences.

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