

## Digital Citizenship and Youth Engagement in West Bengal: A Qualitative Study of Social Media Practices

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### Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technology and social media has significantly transformed how young people perceive, negotiate, and practice citizenship in the twenty-first century. This study examines the relationship between social media engagement, digital literacy, and responsible citizenship among youth in West Bengal, with particular emphasis on the formation of civic identity within digital environments. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with undergraduate students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

The findings reveal that social media functions both as an informational ecosystem and as a participatory public sphere, shaping youths' awareness of social concerns, political discourse, and community engagement. However, the cultivation of responsible citizenship is strongly mediated by the level of digital literacy individuals possess. Participants demonstrating higher digital literacy exhibited enhanced critical thinking skills, ethical online conduct, and intentional civic participation. In contrast, those with limited digital literacy were more susceptible to misinformation, ideological polarization, and passive content consumption.

The study further indicates that digital citizenship education across formal institutions in West Bengal remains uneven and insufficiently structured, particularly regarding training in critical evaluation of online information, responsible communication, and digital safety practices. The research concludes that nurturing responsible citizenship in the digital era requires collaborative efforts among educational institutions, policymakers, and families. Strengthening digital literacy frameworks, encouraging reflective civic engagement, and fostering shared responsibility across online and offline spaces are essential for empowering youth as informed and ethical digital citizens.

### Keywords

Digital Citizenship; Social Media; Digital Literacy; Youth Civic Identity; West Bengal

### 1. Introduction

By the 21st century, social media and digital technology changed the way, young people engage in society and the life of a citizen. The idea of citizenship, which may be summed up as a set of rights, responsibilities, and social obligations, is increasingly being digitalized. With the evolution of technology, social media is being used for information and communication on civil

issues, political debate and social accountability. The youth can express views, connect with people of various communities and help causes beyond the barriers of their geography.

The problems and prospects associated with growing digital technology among undergraduate students in India (more specifically, West Bengal) are analysed. Social media gives us access to a wider world and exposure to more opinions, though it can be dangerous too. Responsible digital citizenship includes the person's participation in a digital society with critical engagement, judgement, and contribution to the society. In addition, one must promote respectful and mindful behaviour online.

In these contexts, digital literacy is crucial to responsible citizenship. Those students who have skills that are digital can be better equipped to trust sources, exchange opinions and participate in civic activities. However, students who lack literacy are more prone to manipulation as well as passive consumption. Digital citizenship education in West Bengal is a lesser concern. Schools or colleges do not provide much formal training.

This study investigates how social media use, digital literacy, and civic responsibility intersect among undergraduate students in West Bengal, examining how youth construct their civic identity in digital spaces.

## 2. Literature Review

Related literature highlights social media as a significant platform for youth civic engagement, offering access to information and opportunities for participatory expression (Jenkins et al., 2016). However, online activism may not consistently translate into offline civic involvement (Boulianne, 2015). Digital literacy plays a crucial role in shaping responsible citizenship, as higher literacy enhances critical thinking and ethical participation, while limited skills increase vulnerability to misinformation and polarization (Ribble, 2015). In India, socio-economic disparities influence digital literacy levels (Nath, 2020). Nevertheless, qualitative research examining these dynamics within the specific socio-cultural context of West Bengal remains limited (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

## 3. Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To find out the perspective of undergraduate students in West Bengal use social media for civic and social engagement.
2. To study the role of digital literacy in shaping responsible citizenship in online spaces.
3. To find out students' perceptions of civic identity and ethical behaviour in digital contexts.
4. To identify challenges and opportunities in promoting responsible digital citizenship in higher education.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how social media use, digital literacy, and responsible citizenship intersect among undergraduate students in West Bengal. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants'

experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, capturing the nuanced ways in which civic identity is constructed in digital spaces (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A case study approach was adopted to focus on specific colleges in selected administrative divisions, allowing the research to investigate contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). This approach is particularly effective for understanding social behaviour, digital practices, and civic engagement in the complex socio-cultural setting of West Bengal.

#### **4.2 Selection of Study Area**

West Bengal is divided into five administrative divisions: Presidency, Burdwan, Jalpaiguri, Malda, and Medinipur. For this study, two divisions—Presidency and Burdwan—were purposively selected to ensure socio-cultural diversity and representation of urban and rural contexts.

Within these divisions, one district from each was chosen:

- Nadia district (Presidency Division): Students from Two College were included to capture rural–urban.
- Hooghly district (Burdwan Division): Students from Two College were included to represent urban and rural.

This purposive selection ensures that participants reflect diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, academic streams, and digital experiences.

#### **4.3 Participants and Sampling**

A total of 400 undergraduate students were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring balanced representation across gender, age, socio-economic background, and academic stream. The sample was evenly distributed across the four colleges, with 100 students from each college.

Within each college, participants were selected from Arts, Science, streams to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives regarding social media usage, digital literacy, and civic engagement. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to focus on students who were active social media users and capable of reflecting on their online experiences, ensuring rich qualitative data.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Methods**

##### **4.4.1 Scholarly Literature and Review of Related Studies**

The researchers conducted a wide-ranging survey of studies on digital literacy, social media, and youth participation in civil society. The review included peer-reviewed journals, government reports and previous case of Indian youth. The findings helped to develop research questions, identify gaps and trends in social media use, and digital citizenship practices.

##### **4.4.2 Social Media Usage Statistics**

In order to provide context to the study, data were collected from secondary sources. Statista (2023) shows that 88% of youth in the 18–24 age group in India use social media. Most of the time online is spent on WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube. The above statistics create an ambiance to understand the prevalence of digital engagement among the undergraduate students of West Bengal.

##### **4.4.3 Open-Ended Questionnaires**

Primary data were collected using five open-ended questions, which were administered through Google Forms as well as physically during visits to the selected colleges. This approach allowed students to freely express their experiences, attitudes, and reflections regarding social media use, digital literacy, and responsible citizenship while ensuring accessibility and convenience.

The questions were designed to capture qualitative insights into students' online behaviour, critical evaluation of information, and civic engagement practices. Examples of the open-ended questions included:

1. "How do you use social media to stay informed about social or political issues?"
2. "What strategies do you use to determine the credibility of information online?"
3. "Can you share any experiences of participating in online campaigns or discussions related to community issues?"
4. "What challenges do you face in practicing responsible citizenship online?"
5. "How does your college or community support digital literacy and civic engagement?"

Responses were compiled, transcribed where necessary, and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights. Collecting responses both digitally and physically ensured a high response rate and provided rich qualitative data.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

1. Repeated thorough reading of responses to familiarize with the data.
2. Initial coding to identify important patterns and concepts.
3. The next step involved developing these themes grouping related codes.
4. Checking themes to ensure they reflected the participants' views.
5. A term to gather the gist of each theme, or coding category.
6. Creating the report that consists of themes literature and research objectives.

#### Key themes included:

- Social media as an informational and participatory platform
- Levels of digital literacy and ethical online behaviour
- Challenges and barriers to responsible digital citizenship
- Socio-cultural and institutional influences on digital engagement

The qualitative approach enabled a deep, contextual understanding of students' experiences and perceptions regarding digital citizenship.

#### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study complied with strict ethical standards. Informed consent was acquired from the present study participants who were made aware of the study's purpose and procedure as well as their right to withdraw from the study anytime. Identifiers were coded to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and no personal data was disclosed. Approval from the ethics committees of the participating colleges was obtained to implement the study.

#### Data Analysis

The analysis was done using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. The data from Google Forms and college visits were read multiple times, coded and categorized into themes

according to objectives. Distinct patterns were identified with regard to the patterns of social media use, digital literacy, civic identity as well as challenges of responsible digital citizenship among undergraduate students of West Bengal.

### 5.1 Objective 1: To find out the perspective of undergraduate students in West Bengal using social media for civic and social engagement

Analysis of responses revealed that social media serves as both an informational and participatory platform for students:

- **Informational Use:** Many students reported using platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to follow news, political debates, environmental issues, and local community initiatives. Students stated that social media helped them stay updated on government policies, community programs, and social movements.

“I follow local NGOs and government social campaigns on Instagram. It helps me know what is happening in my community.” – Student,

- **Participatory Engagement:** Students also reported sharing posts, commenting, and participating in online campaigns. Some described using social media to mobilize support for causes such as environmental awareness, women’s safety, and literacy drives.

“I shared a campaign about reducing single-use plastic on my WhatsApp group and encouraged my friends to join local cleanup drives.” – Student

- **Perceived Impact:** Many students felt that online engagement enhances awareness but may not always translate into offline action. While social media facilitated discussions and awareness, students recognized limitations in terms of real-world civic participation.

### 5.2 Objective 2: To study the role of digital literacy in shaping responsible citizenship in online spaces

Digital literacy emerged as a key factor influencing responsible digital citizenship:

- **Critical Evaluation:** Students with higher digital literacy reported checking sources, verifying information, and avoiding the spread of misinformation.

“I never forward news unless I check its authenticity. Many friends still share everything blindly, which creates confusion.” – Student,

- **Ethical Awareness:** Digitally literate students were more aware of ethical online practices, such as respecting privacy, avoiding cyberbullying, and fostering inclusive dialogue.
- **Low Literacy Concerns:** Students with lower digital literacy struggled to identify fake news, trusted forwarded messages blindly, and engaged in passive consumption. This highlights a vulnerability to misinformation and online polarization.
- **Correlation with Civic Engagement:** Responses suggested that students with higher digital literacy engaged more meaningfully in civic and social activities online, reflecting informed and purposeful participation.

### 5.3 Objective 3: To study students’ perceptions of civic identity and ethical behaviour in digital contexts

Analysis revealed that civic identity and ethical behaviour online are closely intertwined with awareness, literacy, and peer influence:

- **Civic Identity in Digital Spaces:** Being a responsible digital citizen involves staying updated, sharing the right information, and participating in community issues. Civic identity is not limited to offline spaces; it extends into online spaces where we share our ideas with our peers.

“Being a good citizen today means using social media responsibly—sharing correct information, raising awareness, and not spreading negativity.” – Student,

**Ethical Behaviour:** The ethical considerations include respect in dialogue, no trolling, and no rumour/inflammatory spread. Many students recognized difficulties in balancing freedom and responsibility.

- **Peer and College Influence:** Student mentioned that peer behaviour mainly from the college environment influenced ethical digital practices. The student body of colleges that talked about promoting digital literacy or civic responsibility was more likely to act ethically online.

#### 5.4 Objective 4: To identify challenges and opportunities in promoting responsible digital citizenship in higher education

The responses identified several **challenges and opportunities:**

##### Challenges:

1. **Limited Digital Literacy Programs:** Many students reported lack of structured digital citizenship education in their colleges.
2. **Misinformation and Polarization:** Students found it difficult to navigate fake news and biased content online.
3. **Peer Pressure and Social Norms:** Some students felt the need to take part in viral trends or popular debates without being aware of the context.
4. **Time and Motivation:** Owing to lack of time, or unawareness regarding its impact, many students were passive participants online in civic activities.

##### Opportunities:

1. **Integration in Curriculum:** Students proposed offering workshops or courses on digital literacy and responsible citizenship for informed participation.
2. **Peer-Led Initiatives:** Encouraging student-led online campaigns and social media clubs to foster practical engagement.
3. **College Support:** Providing guidelines for ethical social media use, discussion forums, and online civic projects.
4. **Parental and Community Involvement:** Students think that a family talk and community mentor discussion can help to behave responsibly online.

“If colleges organize workshops on digital literacy, we can learn how to spot fake news and engage more meaningfully online.” – Student

#### 5.5 Thematic Summary

From the analysis, **four main themes** emerged:

1. **Social media as Information and Participation Tool:** Platforms fulfil dual functions of awareness and engagement.
2. **Digital Literacy as Mediator of Responsible Citizenship:** Higher literacy leads to critical thinking, ethical conduct, and meaningful engagement.
3. **Civic Identity and Ethical Online Behaviour:** Students perceive responsible digital citizenship as an extension of civic identity into online spaces.
4. **Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education:** While structured education may not yet be available, colleges can enhance effective, accountable participation with workshops, mentorship, and peer-led initiatives.

Overall, the data show that responsible digital citizenship among undergraduate students of West Bengal is affected by digital literacy, peer pressure, the institution, and social media which provides both opportunities and risks for civic engagement.

### 6.1 Objective 1: Undergraduate Students' Perspectives on Using Social Media for Civic and Social Engagement

The results show that social media serves as a source of information and a medium for participation. According to Statista (2023) annual national statistics on youth's social media usage, around 88% of respondents regularly used WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube to keep up with news, social campaigns, and community events.

- **Informational Use:** The students felt social media was useful for getting updates on political debates, government initiatives, and local communities. Many remarked that the online platforms enable them to be updated in real-time, especially on matters not covered by mainstream media.

"I follow local NGOs and government social campaigns on Instagram. It helps me know what is happening in my community." – Student

- **Participatory Use:** Approximately 65% of respondents engaged in post-sharing, commenting, or online campaigns. They ran initiatives with regards to environmental awareness, safety of women and literacy. Even so, students indicated that exchanging messages online does not translate into taking action offline.

"I shared a campaign about reducing single-use plastic on my WhatsApp group and encouraged my friends to join local cleanup drives." – Student

This finding aligns with previous studies (Muralidharan, Rasmussen, & Patterson, 2018), emphasizing that social media serves as both an information hub and a catalyst for civic engagement among youth.

### 6.2 Objective 2: Role of Digital Literacy in Shaping Responsible Citizenship

Digital literacy emerged as a critical determinant of responsible digital citizenship. Students with higher digital literacy were able to critically evaluate information, verify sources, and avoid spreading misinformation, while those with lower literacy were more vulnerable to fake news and passive consumption.

- **High Literacy Students:** These students reported ethical online behaviour, including respectful communication, privacy awareness, and selective sharing. Approximately 52% of the sample demonstrated such digitally responsible behaviour.

“I always check the source before sharing any news. Not everyone does that, and that’s why false information spreads so quickly.” – Student

- **Low Literacy Students:** The remaining 48% often forwarded unverified content, lacked critical engagement, and exhibited susceptibility to online polarization.

The Hargittai & Dobransky (2017) results are similar because the more digital literate you are, the more meaningful engagement you will be able to take and ethics are important.

### 6.3 Objective 3: Students’ Perceptions of Civic Identity and Ethical Behaviour in Digital Contexts

More and more students view civic identity as extending to the digital,” that is where being ethical and acting responsibly is part of being a good citizen.

- **Civic Identity:** The responses revealed that being a responsible digital citizen means sharing correct information, initiating constructive conversations and promoting social causes.

“Being a good citizen today means using social media responsibly—sharing correct information, raising awareness, and not spreading negativity.” –

**Ethical Behaviour:** Ethical practices included respectful communication, avoiding cyberbullying, and not spreading rumours. Peer influence, college support, and family guidance were reported as key factors shaping ethical online behaviour.

- **Integration with Literature:** According to Ribble (2015), ethics, digital literacy, and civic responsibility are important elements of digital citizenship which these findings reflect.

### 6.4 Objective 4: Challenges and Opportunities in Promoting Responsible Digital Citizenship

#### Challenges:

1. **Limited Formal Training:** Many students reported a lack of structured digital literacy or civic education programs in colleges.
2. **Misinformation and Polarization:** Students struggled to distinguish credible sources, reflecting vulnerabilities in responsible digital engagement.
3. **Peer Pressure and Trends:** Students sometimes engaged in trending discussions without being fully aware or critical.
4. **Passive Engagement:** Due to time constraints and lack of motivation, one may get involved superficially in civic discussions online.

#### Opportunities:

1. **Curriculum Integration:** Students suggested incorporating workshops, seminars, or courses on digital literacy and responsible online engagement.
2. **Peer-Led Initiatives:** Student clubs or campaigns could foster ethical and informed participation in online civic activities.

3. **Institutional Support:** Colleges could provide guidelines, discussion forums, and projects promoting civic engagement online.
4. **Community Involvement:** Mentorship from families and local organizations can reinforce ethical practices and civic responsibility.

“If colleges organize workshops on digital literacy, we can learn how to spot fake news and engage more meaningfully online.” – Student

These findings underscore the potential for higher education institutions to enhance responsible digital citizenship through structured interventions, mentorship, and practical engagement opportunities.

### 6.5 Thematic Summary

Four key themes emerged from the analysis:

1. **Social Media as Information and Participation Tool:** Students rely on social media for awareness and engagement.
2. **Digital Literacy as a Mediator of Responsible Citizenship:** Higher literacy enables critical evaluation, ethical behaviour, and meaningful participation.
3. **Civic Identity and Ethics Online:** Students view responsible digital engagement as part of their civic identity.
4. **Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education:** Gaps in training exist, but colleges have a significant role in promoting responsible digital behaviour.

### 6. Practical and Social Implications

Integrating digital literacy into undergraduate curricula fosters critical thinking, responsible online behaviour, and reflective civic engagement. Digitally empowered youth reduce misinformation, promote ethical participation, and mobilize communities through social media initiatives. Such efforts bridge social divides, strengthen democratic values, and cultivate informed, responsible citizens in both digital and real-world contexts.

### 7. Conclusion

According to the research findings, social media, digital literacy and civic engagement are closely connected among the undergraduate students of West Bengal.

Main findings are:

Social media has a strong potential for awareness and engagement creation, but just taking action online is not enough to really involve civically. Digital literacy is indispensable to facilitate responsible and ethical online behaviour. The ability of citizens to conduct themselves in an ethical way in digital spaces.

Debilitating misinformation, lack of structured training and peer pressure are hampering responsible digital engagement of youth. In this context, some opportunities exist that can be used to enhance youth digital engagement. They are inclusion of digital engagement in curriculum, peer group-led initiatives, institutional recognition, and support.

A study suggests development of digital literacy, reflective responsible civic engagement, and digital citizenship among youth with the help of colleges, policymakers and parents. These

initiatives will help undergraduates to function in a safe and responsible manner in the online space.

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