

Research Article

Students' Perceptions of E-participation in Social Media, Citizen Mobilisation and Engagement: Evidence from Papua New Guinea, India, and Zimbabwe

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This comparative case study analysed university students' perspectives of social media as a citizen mobilisation and engagement tool for national dialogue in Papua New Guinea, India, and Zimbabwe. The 300-sample size was chosen from a population of 558 students using computer software called a pseudo-random number generator. A mixed-methods online survey was used to collect the data, and representatives of the students were interviewed virtually. The study's findings revealed that geographical differences, societal values, and contextual factors impacted the mobilisation and engagement processes in the three nations, leading to varied degrees of participation. Comparing social media to more conventional forms of communication, the respondents preferred social media, particularly WhatsApp. Concerns regarding government surveillance and data security were raised by the respondents. Students' typical perceptions about using social media for citizen engagement in national social and political processes tended to focus on building consensus among a large cross-section of the populace.

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Introduction

Due to its popularity and ease of use, social media has emerged as a significant tool for societal creativity and cohesion, as well as for encouraging students and citizens to express themselves freely on topics that have an impact on communities around them and the world (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Desautels, 2011). Students utilise social media extensively because it allows them to communicate more cheaply, enjoy themselves, conduct research, and build groups, to just name a few purposes. University students worldwide are clearly using social media more and more as a kind of social capital, accelerating the globalisation of communication. Students have demonstrated a lot of enthusiasm, hope, and attention toward community development and governance (Gulzar, Hassan, & Rasheed, 2022). Similarly, Mäntymäki and Riemer (2016) established that social media has allowed students to work toward using it to participate in internationally significant topics like citizen involvement and mobilisation. In Article 6 of its 1945 Charter, the United Nations (UN) recognised youth participation in governance, which includes the majority of university students, as a fundamental human right. The UN also expressed its wish to see youth empowerment through engagement and participation in local communities on issues that concern them. It is clear that social media has influenced world politics; for instance, during the 2011 Arab uprisings, there were more students than usual. Leach and Scoones (2007) claim that when students are empowered and mobilised through social media, they participate in evolving forms of social identity and solidarity. Additionally, they develop into informed actors involved in dynamic, networked politics and development on all fronts. When students and citizens are involved, they ensure that public institutions are transparent and accountable by offering quick and effective solutions to issues that affect their communities. In the context of this background regarding social media and youths' participation in issues that concern them, this study aims to assess how university students perceive the use of social media in citizen mobilisation and engagement for national dialogue. The study poses the question, "To what extent can university students, through social media, lead to national dialogue for socio-economic development?" The following objectives were considered in order to respond to this question:

- i. Evaluate the extent to which social media is being used by students for public engagement and mobilisation;
- ii. Evaluate the challenges being faced by students in the three countries in using social media; and

- iii. Offer recommendations on how to promote and enhance the use of social media in a responsible manner for open dialogue.

Theoretical framework

The literature analysed in this study is influenced by Bourdieu's social capital theory, which emphasises the development of long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships through social interactions (Qi et al., 2018). This idea contends that social capital (relationships) is reciprocal and advantageous to all individuals (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu added that a vast social network, solid connections, wholesome connections, and wholesome social institutions are all components of social capital. It is assumed that the members may gain advantages like solidarity even though they may not be actively pursued. In a study conducted in Switzerland, Germany, and Japan by Jörg (2022), it was discovered that social media participation is possible when people are linked to the internet. According to Kade and Gray (2018), citizen engagement and mobilisation are processes that bring the public together to increase awareness of common issues, help citizens have more productive conversations, and become agents of societal, familial, and individual change. In light of this study, citizen participation and mobilisation efforts should concentrate on national dialogue for nation-building through policy influence.

Social capital has its roots in academia, but its use has since moved to a variety of fields, including business, economics, politics, and social life (Tripathi & Verma, 2017a; Claridge, 2014). Social configurations that produce beneficial results are the subject of social capital. The latest forms of engagement and interactions have emerged as a result of social media's explosive growth as a form of social capital (Sloam, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has also promoted adoption and challenged students to quickly adapt by pushing some higher education institutions to immediately shift to other social media platforms for teaching and learning objectives (Chen & Xiao, 2022). The production and dissemination of ideas, interests, information, and other kinds of expression through networks and online communities are made possible by the collaborative technologies that make up social media. When people from different communities come together for a single cause, it is called citizen mobilisation. E-participation is a digital communication platform that enables participants residing in various locations to engage in free speech, maintain connections, express their creativity, and create socially cohesive groups. The World Bank (2023) defines engagement as the exchange of information between all key stakeholders and the government. People who use social media regularly build their social capital, which is essential for establishing relationships that are advantageous to both the group

and the individual. Large social networks, solid and supportive relationships, and supportive social structures are all necessary for the development of social capital. Empowered students can start the process of mobilising and engaging citizens in areas of interest (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

A global perspective on social media

Social media consumption varies by country due to a variety of contextual factors (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). As an illustration, Harekrishna (2003) noted that social media connects a diverse group of users from various geographic places in India due to advanced ICT infrastructure and facilities. Students now have the ability to express themselves openly. Students can create and distribute blogs, video articles, and audio pieces. According to a study by Ansari and Khan (2020), social media is essential for collaboration between students, their teachers, and communities. Valenzuela (2013) buttresses the same by claiming that social media allows students and ordinary citizens to effectively engage and participate in governance processes.

Students and citizens should be made aware that engagement and participation in governance are every citizen's democratic fundamental rights (Newberry, 2023; Amirkhanyan et al., 2019; UN, 1945). Key stakeholders can be included in the creation of policies and the execution of government projects and programmes through engagement and participation (Quick & Bryson, 2016). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2012) has given young people in developing countries, such as Moldova, Lebanon, and Libya, the ability to participate in politics and other community-based socio-economic projects. Because of this initiative, youths have become involved in politics and decision-making in the region and throughout the world (Adam & Shahin, 2017). Social media has been successful in giving students and citizens a voice, which has sparked protests against corrupt officials and bad governance in several parts of the world (Adam & Shahin, 2017). The right of students to participate in democracies makes it crucial. However, the lack of a supportive atmosphere leaves students and young people with limited exposure and options. Most of the world's students feel alienated from the decision-making processes. The right of students to actively participate in politics and governmental affairs is guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1945).

India. Due to a robust ICT infrastructure and facilities, the growth of digital payments and e-commerce in India has resulted in a rise in the use of social media among students and younger demographics (Harekrishna, 2003). In India today, social media is used for a variety of purposes, including leisure,

checking updates (86%), sending messages/emails (82%), sharing/viewing photographs (81%), participating in discussions on topics that affect them/their products/services (58%), using the site's applications (63%), and researching potential employers/employees (43%) (Basuroy, 2022). Students constituted the majority of India's 330 million active social media users in 2019 and are predicted to constitute 448 million by the end of 2023. Most students and citizens use mobile devices and other associated technologies to access social networks. India's median age, which reflects the youth who make up the majority of the country's students, is 27.1 years old. Generation Z and Millennials account for the majority of social media usage. On social media, millennials account for 52.3% of the results. Generation Z accounts for 28.4% of social media talks, while people in the 35–44 age group make up 15.1%. In a study that was conducted by Nasir, Khatoon, and Bharadwaj (2018), Facebook and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms in India. In a survey conducted by Singh, Iyengar, and Kaur, (2022), it was revealed that 95.4% of female students in the Naga District were active on social media, and 60% of them were involved in online politics. According to a related study carried out by Hardeep and Singh (2022) and Abheeshai (2022), the majority of Indians were discovered to be actively involved in governance matters, boosting service delivery and good corporate governance. This suggests that levels of involvement and participation in governance may be strong, which prompts dialogue about problems that have an impact on the communities.

Zimbabwe. As indicated by its high internet adoption rate of 61.3%, Zimbabwe has a more urbanised culture with a younger population that appreciates social media as a tool for communication and self-expression (Karombo, 2023). Student involvement in governance in Zimbabwe has historically been influenced by factors like the high school graduation rate, religion, and ethnicity (Makwerere, 2019). These factors influence the political environment, external factors, and student expectations for the future. As a result, social media has been instrumental in orchestrating political demonstrations and igniting youth movements, as seen, for example, in Zimbabwe and other African countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, and Egypt, where students have encountered government interference, furthering the local mentality of responsible citizens (Insecurity Insight, 2020; Mavhunga & McKenzie, 2019; Adepoju, 2020). According to Mavhunga and McKenzie (2019), all social media was blocked in Zimbabwe when people were demonstrating against poor governance and the deterioration of the economy. In Zimbabwe, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, among others, have encouraged open exchanges since they are less expensive and allow students to share diverse viewpoints on topics of interest (Lunga, 2021). Chikwanha (2009) adds that the emergence of political

organisations and activism on social media in Zimbabwe has aided citizens in establishing a Habermasian public sphere. Everyone in Zimbabwe has the right to freely engage in social, economic, political, and other aspects of life under Section 20 of the country's 2013 Constitution. However, the Zimbabwean government has violated students' rights to freedom of expression and association by treating them as state adversaries because they have different viewpoints.

Papua New Guinea. Social media is a popular tool for activism and campaigning in Papua New Guinea (PNG), especially in places where traditional media is prohibited. Given that its civilisation is predominantly rural (86.6%) and traditional, community bonds are essential (Kemp, 2022). Only 12% of the population had access to the internet, 8% of them were on social media, and only a few people used it continually throughout the day (PNG Business News, 2022). In PNG, social media usage is thought to be unimportant. This might also imply that there are not enough ICT resources available, which would reduce student involvement and participation. However, in PNG, youths, including students, participate through the Open Government Partnership (OGP), and the Government feels this platform helps and enhances transparency, inclusive decision-making, improved service delivery, and the creation of job opportunities for the youths (Papua New Guinea Government, 2022). However, literature on student involvement in governance and related topics is scarce. Nevertheless, the Government is dedicated to ensuring that everyone exists and participates in governance issues, both formally and informally. Concerns about ineffective leadership, corruption, subpar service delivery, and political instability, among other things, have been voiced by students, the general public, and pressure groups (Hayward-Jones, 2016). This indicates that there has been little public mobilisation or involvement.

In the above section of the literature review, the researchers have presented a country-by-country scenario regarding social media consumption by the youths and their involvement in the affairs of their countries. The next section discusses the challenges faced by university students when using social media.

Challenges related to the use of social media

Despite being a potent tool for communication, the use of social media is not without its problems, including the exclusion of minorities, character assassination, and cyberbullying. Minorities have historically been undermined in terms of development, and in most cases, these communities lack access to power and the internet, which are the enablers of social media. Most developing countries have insufficient ICT infrastructure and facilities, occasional power outages, and some places are remote,

which makes it difficult for them to be connected to others (Zvavahera et al., 2022). Government censorship has been a problem for students, which has lowered their levels of engagement and participation (Moynihan, 2011; Parlow, 2008; Berner, Amos, & Morse, 2011). Globally, student participation and engagement are typically poor due to lack of internet, the cost of data, the cost of smartphones, government interference, and socio-cultural values (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2013; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Because of technology, these difficulties have not stopped students and communities from using social media to raise their concerns. Social media has the potential to be the most effective tool for student and public empowerment when it is supported because it has helped to shape developmental goals in various contexts. It is a simple and inexpensive medium for the exchange of concepts and knowledge. The growth of the discourse of interaction benefits from the use of the internet and social media. Despite the fact that social media influences engagement and participation in most parts of the world, concerns have been voiced about the transmission of false information and hate speech. However, Moynihan (2011) reported that students' and residents' lack of engagement and participation contributed to the Netherlands' bad governance and continued deterioration of service delivery. According to Becton (2022), social media use has more positives than problems. The next section discusses the methodology of the study.

Methodology

This case study used a mixed research methodology and included university students in their second year of study from Zimbabwe, India, and Papua New Guinea. Three universities from the three countries were selected to further investigate how students view e-participation in social media, citizen mobilisation, and engagement based on regional differences, societal values, and contextual factors. One university was specifically picked from each country. There were 121 students at Catholic University in Zimbabwe, 187 students at IBS University in Papua New Guinea, and 250 students at Amrita Institutions in India. Thus, 558 students made up the study's population. The primary researcher's institution was consulted for ethical approval before the study could be carried out. The questionnaire and interviews also followed ethical and data protection guidelines. In order to guarantee equal participation of the students from the three countries and the selected universities, a sample of 100 participants from each university was selected using a pseudo-random number generator (PRNG), a piece of computer-based software. The PRNG was developed to choose a "random" integer between min = 0 and max = 100 by utilising a randomised math function. Due to an unintentional selection bias in the algorithm or

computer software, these random number generators were pseudo-random. Therefore, the data were gathered with a confidence interval of 0.04% using a mean of 100 respondents and a deviation of 3.2. Three hundred students made up the study's sample.

The questionnaire was administered to the 300 potential respondents, and 179 of them were returned, representing a 60% response rate. The researchers were able to send the surveys to all respondents while keeping track of how the identified individuals were responding since they used an internet platform. It took an average of seven minutes to complete the questionnaire. A reminder email was sent to participants on day 14 of the survey's one-month open period, which began with its dissemination in February 2023.

By including questions that would not reveal the identity of the respondents, the study adhered to the principles that protect research participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, the respondents were free to stop taking part in the study at any time without providing a reason. The participants completed consent forms. The questionnaires were also submitted online, and before they were sent, the researchers deactivated any features that would have revealed the respondents' identity. Utilising graphs and narratives, data were presented and analysed in the order of the study's objectives.

The following abbreviations were used to identify the student representatives from the three universities: SR1-Papua New Guinea, SR2-Zimbabwe, and SR3-India.

Findings and Discussion

The response rate and the respondents' demographics are described in this section. Additionally, the results are presented and debated. Finally, this section also presents, explores, draws conclusions, and proffers recommendations to the relevant authorities.

Demographic data of the respondents

The sample included a wide range of respondents from varied economic and subcultural backgrounds. Zimbabwe had a 100% response rate, India had a 46% response rate, and Papua New Guinea had a 33% response rate. The response rate for the study was therefore 60%. According to Figure 1, 68% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29, followed by 26% among those between 30 and 39, 3% among those between 40 and 49, 2% among those between 50 and 59, and 1% among those aged 60 and above.

The variance in response rates could be due to the three countries' radically different geographical characteristics, societal values, and contextual factors, including the levels of ICT infrastructure and facilities development, ICT absorption rate, and internet access, among others. Social and cultural factors may have operated as a mediating influence despite India's excellent ICT infrastructure and facilities. Zimbabwe's 100% response rate may indicate that the nation has a high rate of computer literacy, robust ICT infrastructure and facilities, internet access, and reasonably priced cellphones and related technologies. The high internet adoption rate of 61.3% in Zimbabwe, according to Karombo (2023), indicates that it is a more urbanised culture with a younger population that appreciates social media as a tool for communication and self-expression. The low response rate from Papua New Guinea (PNG) may indicate, among other things, restricted internet access, high cost of smartphones and other mobile devices, and that data is beyond the reach of most students. The low response rate in PNG is consistent with Kemp's (2022) conclusions that just 8% of the population had access to social media in 2022 and that social media is not valued. The amount of participation and engagement among students as a whole is impacted by this social aspect.

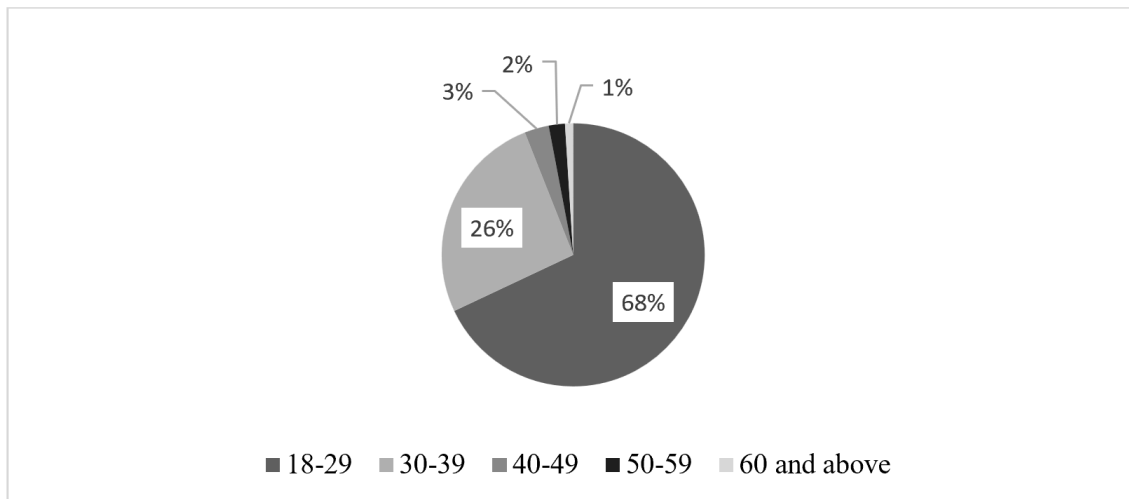


Figure 1. Age of respondents

Objective 1: Evaluate the extent to which social media is being used for public engagement and mobilisation.

Figure 2 displays the many ways that respondents in the three universities used social media. At the top of the list was communication with a 30% ranking, followed by entertainment with 20%, education with

19%, business with 15%, current news with 8%, and others with 8%. A social media account was not stated by 3% of the respondents. Interviews with student leaders in India and Zimbabwe showed that most of the students had smartphones or other similar gadgets to use for social media. In contrast, interviews with the student representative in Papua New Guinea (PNG) provided a depressing picture of some of the students, who came from low-income households and were unable to buy smartphones or related devices, let alone data. It was further revealed that some students' parents/guardians did not esteem cellphones and social media highly, thereby depriving students of the opportunities to engage and participate in important issues in their communities and the world at large. PNG respondents lamented the country's patchy internet availability. They also mentioned the absence of family support and the high expenses of data, smartphones, and related gadgets. It was discovered that parents continued to maintain the patriarchal system by providing boys with superior prospects and facilities. However, student representatives from the three countries expressed enthusiasm for participating in national debates despite the constraints. Some respondents (35%) from Zimbabwe indicated that they were uneasy because their government was screening their accounts, instilling fear in them.

We try to involve everyone, including our parents and friends, particularly in topics that concern us, such as the deplorable state of the economy, politics, service delivery, and government policies, to name a few. As much as we would like to join in and take part in discussing challenges that impact our communities and the nation as a whole, we do not feel secure doing so. By engaging, we gain diverse and practical insights, which is essential for socio-economic development (SR2). We also develop content that we share with others.

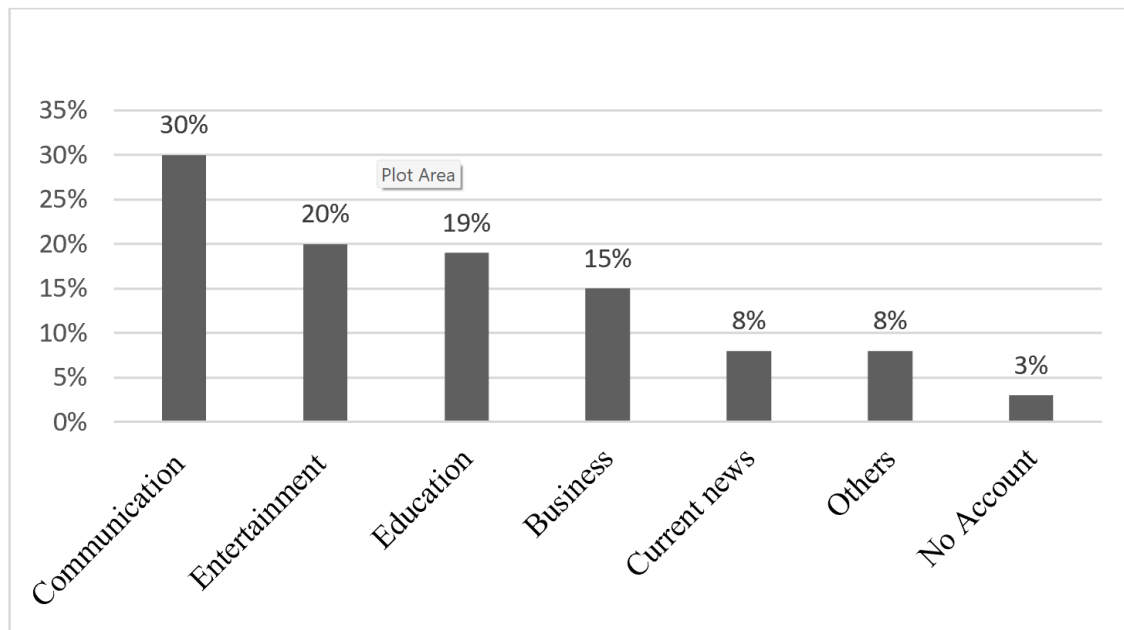


Figure 2. Uses of social media

According to the study, the vast majority of the respondents (30%) used social media for communication, and it was encouraging to note that 19% of the respondents used social media for business, which is essential for creating the next generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs. The findings also demonstrate that the respondents were involved in matters that had an impact on them and their communities. It was also pleasing to note that the majority of respondents were active participants and content providers rather than just content consumers. The accessibility and simplicity of creating user profiles and materials could be cited as factors in social media's widespread use. The 3% of respondents who indicated they did not have a social media account may be among those who said they did not have a smartphone or other similar device. This may be PNG respondents, where it was revealed that several students came from low-income families and could not even afford a smartphone or related gadget. In PNG, smartphones were not prioritised, especially for female students, and this societal value influenced its consumption. The fact that families continued empowering the boy child more than the girl child, deepening the gender inequalities in society, was also alarming. This implies that it might be difficult for these students to stay current on what could be happening around the world. Additionally, this implies that their involvement in social dialogue about politics, development, and other topics is constrained.

The 8% (others) could be alluding to politics since some of the students were not free to express their interest in politics. This could be true because it is challenging to distinguish between politics and issues

like governance, service delivery, corruption, and nepotism. This finding corroborates the findings by Valenzuela (2013), Baumgartner and Morris (2010), Yamamoto and Kushin (2013), who noted that most emerging nations had limited freedoms of expression and association. Governments censoring students has a negative impact on their participation rates (Berner, Amos & Morse, 2011; Parlow, 2008; and Moynihan, 2011). It was upsetting to learn that governments lacked compassion and denied students this fundamental right. It was also significant to observe that the respondents had grown their social capital, which is essential for social media-based national discourse on shared topics of interest. It is obvious that social media, given the opportunity, has the power to empower students and citizens, resulting in better governance, sound democratic practices, and the provision of high-quality goods and services. It further embodies the democratisation of information by transforming citizens from content consumers into information producers. As a result, this encourages conversations among individuals, groups, and the broader public.

According to the respondents' favourite social media sites, WhatsApp was the most popular at 33%, followed by Facebook at 25%, Instagram at 17%, Twitter at 12%, Telegram at 7%, other at 5%, WeChat at 2%, and Viber at 1% (see Figure 3).

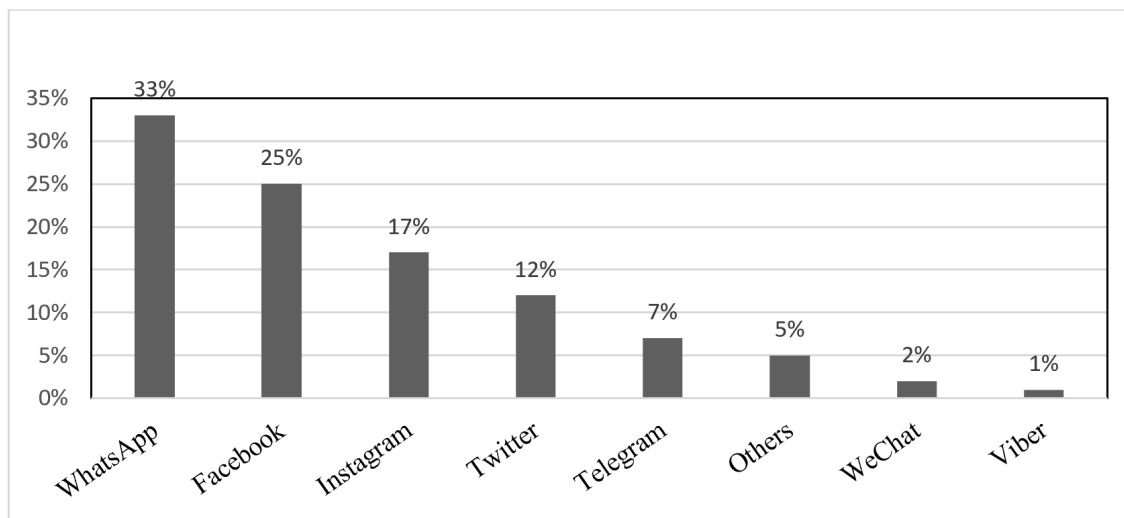


Figure 3. Social media usage

The introduction of WhatsApp to the Indian digital market increased app adoption, which has just doubled in rural areas. This is due to our modern ICT facilities and infrastructure. The messaging service's reach goes beyond metropolitan areas, which is beneficial for engagement and national

discourse. Students and other social groups have developed very substantial social capital, thanks to social media and technology. WhatsApp is particularly affordable, and simple to install and utilise. As long as the other party is logged in, one can also place calls from anywhere in the world. Students participate in numerous discussions regarding issues that concern them, and this has been really beneficial. The major concern is that its usage has not been formally acknowledged or endorsed by the Government (SR3).

In our nation of Zimbabwe, the Government communicates with its population on important matters through Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. However, because of the difficulty of accessing energy and the internet in rural locations, some of the students and members of the general public do not use social media. These platforms are tough for the elderly and the illiterate to use, while WhatsApp is straightforward and user-friendly. The issue is that the Government does not currently recognise it as a formal route of communication. There is a need for our government to approve its use because the majority of the people use it (SR2).

Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that social media did not always provide correct and accurate information, compared to 40% who were unconcerned and 45% who said it did. The majority of respondents (45%) indicated that social media indeed provided accurate information. The three student representatives agreed and endorsed it.

Social media allows for instantaneous communication, which is essential in the contemporary high-tech environment. Everyone who uses social media gets updated on the most recent events and news. Through social media, we are increasingly aware of what is happening in other nations (SR2).

I personally support my government's legalization of social media because it is simple, inexpensive, immediate, and reliable (SR1).

In-depth follow-up interviews with the student representatives found that social media platforms frequently featured public discussions on hot-button subjects. They said that it was feasible to participate in public discussions and debates about political and developmental issues and that it was their responsibility as future leaders to create the kind of future and world they want. However, two of the student leaders (R2 and SR3) lamented the absence of student involvement in important development concerns in their nations. They were quick to cite repressive laws as the major obstacle.

There is proof that social media has changed the way people communicate, surpassing more conventional routes, thanks to technology. This represents a significant movement away from

conventional forms of communication and toward a contemporary channel that is both immediate and widely accessible. It might also imply that the majority of respondents can afford the price of cellphones and other relevant technologies. The cost of data also affects how much time people spend on social media. These results are in line with the study's theoretical framework, which holds that social media fosters the development of social capital that benefits everyone (Qi et al., 2018; Bourdieu, 1977). Due to social media's widespread acceptability, it is imperative that governments and service providers create regulations that permit the widespread usage of social media, particularly WhatsApp. The usage of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram for business objectives is now acceptable to modern organisations. It is past due for businesses and governments to begin considering WhatsApp, WeChat, Viber, and other platforms not yet named as official communication channels. The rules and regulations that will direct their use may be the missing link.

Forty-five percent of respondents agreed that social media indeed provided accurate information to its audience, countering the 15% of respondents who said that social media did not provide accurate information. The reason why the majority of respondents believed in social media could be that most of the information shared there comes from reputable sources, like news outlets, newspapers, and official announcements, among others. A valid point is that some of the information shared on social media may not have been verified and approved by the persons involved. However, the public typically disseminates such knowledge in good faith in most circumstances.

Objective 2: Evaluate the challenges being faced by students in the three countries when using social media

It was highlighted that some students from low-income families could not afford a smartphone or other connected device, let alone data, depriving them of access to crucial information. This was one of the obstacles the respondents reported for failing to access social media. Even if Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram were recognised as official communication channels in the three countries, the situation was different for other apps like WhatsApp, Viber, and WeChat. Fifty-six percent of those surveyed said they favoured WhatsApp over more formal ones because it was simpler to install and utilise. The high cost of data and cellphones was one common complaint made by respondents in Papua New Guinea, and this was backed up by their student representative who responded as follows:

Because they cannot afford data, some students can only access their social media accounts while they are on campus or in other locations with free Wi-Fi. For individuals who utilise it for learning

purposes, this is a barrier. Since social media is being utilised for education more, the Government ought to step in and subsidize data (SR1).

The restriction of material uploaded on social media by their government was also lamented by the students.

The Government in our nation closely monitors social media, particularly WhatsApp. Police frequently contact students who would have expressed dissension in order to question them. In extreme circumstances, criticising government initiatives and programmes may result in imprisonment without trial. Even though freedom of association and expression is everyone's fundamental right as guaranteed by our Constitution, people are nevertheless denied it despite the fact that social media helps to promote democratic societies. We occasionally run political campaigns as students, and when they are against the governing party, we lose. However, social media is giving the repressed and the silent a voice (SR2).

The UN's Charter of 1945 stipulates principles of freedom of expression and association which are violated by certain governments' positions that social media usage should be banned. The majority of constitutions also mention unrestricted freedoms of expression and association. Even though the difficulties mentioned by the respondents were real, it is vital for all social media writers and participants to exercise caution when sharing information. Governments' main responsibilities are to safeguard their population from harm and to uphold the constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech. The main issue is that there are no defined guidelines for using social media, particularly WhatsApp and other platforms.

Figure 4 demonstrates that the respondents still preferred social media, particularly WhatsApp. Forty-two percent of respondents reported that overall, social media use had a beneficial influence on their lives, while 30% said it had a negative impact. According to interviews with student representatives, social media was more efficient than traditional media.

Despite the fact that 42% of the respondents said social media had a good influence on people's lives, only 3% of respondents called for its legalisation, while 1% opposed it. Twenty-five percent of the respondents were neutral.

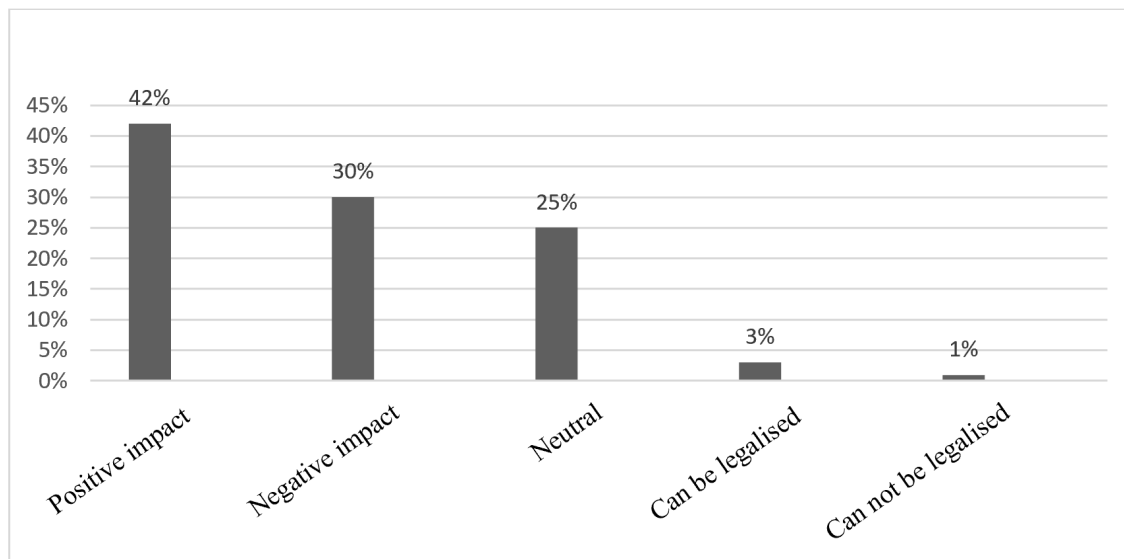


Figure 4. Comments on the use of social media

When compared to conventional communication channels, social media has a stronger positive impact and is more effective, as indicated by the response rate of 42%. The survey also revealed a relatively low response rate for the question of whether or not governments should make social media use lawful. According to the findings of this study, it is crucial for governments to start discussions about how they can effectively embrace social media as an efficient means of communication given that the majority of young people, who will be the future leaders, use it. They feel at ease utilising it for a variety of applications because it is affordable and simple to use.

Conclusions

The study's findings showed that users of social media, especially WhatsApp, strongly supported its use and legalisation. Social networking was discovered to be more affordable, practical, and efficient. According to this study, social media has the potential to empower citizens, enhance democratic processes, and provide access to high-quality goods and services for the general public. It captures the democratisation of information, transforming citizens from information consumers to information producers. As a result, this encourages conversations among groups, peers, and the broader public.

Confidentiality and government rejection were the main issues brought up by the respondents, and this may also be the case in other countries. For example, after disasters such as cyclones and COVID-19, the Government of Zimbabwe used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram to express policy and other

important announcements. Because the majority of people currently utilise social media, this study can draw the conclusion that its responsible usage can significantly advance national dialogue, which is essential for socio-economic growth worldwide. Therefore, it is preferable for governments to create laws that permit social media use in a responsible manner, just like they do for mainstream or conventional media of communication such as newspapers and magazines, among others. The silenced now have a voice thanks to social media.

The use of social media varies significantly among the three countries; thus, it is crucial for organisations and people looking to connect with these communities to be aware of these disparities. According to the study, a variety of contextual factors affected how social media was used in the three countries. Each country was impacted differently by the degrees of economic development, political influence, ICT infrastructure and facilities, and social considerations. Social media was considered a luxury in PGN, while it was widely used by students in India and Zimbabwe, increasing their possibilities of being involved in local and national concerns.

Recommendations

This part covers the study's final objective, which is to make recommendations regarding ways to encourage and improve the responsible use of social media for public discourse, with governments serving as the primary players in terms of regulation. Countries must adapt to the technology they can afford as long as they are safe because they are at different stages of technological progress.

The general public should use social media in a responsible manner and accept accountability for any offensive content posted to other users. Social media users should be careful not to hurt others, be aware of the consequences of using it inappropriately, and safeguard their privacy and confidentiality. Governments should assist such emerging technologies by implementing rules that govern their appropriate use, notably WhatsApp because it was the most popular, given the strong desire to utilise it.

Government officials, media outlets, and other important stakeholders should participate in research with the goal of altering the current communication channels, which are seriously threatened by social media. These discussions will help all parties involved adopt digital communication, which is more dependable and less expensive. Additionally, it gives the general population the ability to quickly engage with and contribute to topics that concern local communities and national development objectives.

Governments need to deal with values and norms that have an impact on students and the general public. Gender-related issues that promote the interest of the boy child should be dealt with from the grassroots level. This affects the girl children to transition into the world of work and contribute meaningfully.

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