



Impact of Social Media on Political Awareness and Civic Engagement among University Students

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Abstract

This study examines the role being played by the social media in shaping political awareness and civic engagement among university students. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, and data was gathered from 450 students across various disciplines. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between social media usage and political awareness, as well as civic engagement. However, the type of content consumed and the platforms used also influenced the extent of engagement. The study concludes that social media does serve as a mighty tool for fostering political consciousness and active citizenship among youth, while also highlighting the need for digital literacy to mitigate misinformation.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Awareness, Civic Engagement, University Students, Digital Platforms

Introduction

The start of the 21st century has been indelibly marked by the rapid ascent and compounding of digitalized technologies into the fabric of daily life. At the forefront of this digitally equipped revolution are social media platforms—dynamic, interactive, and pervasive networks that have fundamentally altered how human beings communicate, form communities, access information, and perceive the world around them. From their nascent forms as simple peer-to-peer connection sites, platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok have evolved into complex ecosystems that influence commerce, culture, and crucially, politics. For the generation of "digital natives" currently populating university campuses globally, social media is not simply a tool or a platform but a primary habitat—a central arena where identity is curated, social life is conducted, and engagement with the broader society is negotiated. This research focuses on this pivotal demographic, investigating the profound and multifaceted impact of social media on two critical pillars of a healthy democracy: political awareness and civic engagement. A person's political awareness, which may be defined as the knowledge and comprehension of political systems, current affairs, governmental procedures, and one's own civic rights and obligations, is the most significant component. Political awareness serves as the fundamental bedrock upon which informed citizenship is created. Formal education, print journalism, broadcast media, and socialisation within the family



were the conventional means that were utilised in order to cultivate this awareness. The actions that individuals and groups take in order to find solutions to problems that are of interest to the broader public are referred to as civic engagement, which is the behavioural similitude of civic engagement. This includes both political activities, such as voting, contacting political officials, and campaigning, as well as non-political, community-oriented acts, such as volunteering, joining local associations, and providing support for social causes. Voting, contacting political officials, and campaigning are all examples of political activities. Because the continued existence of any democracy is contingent on a populace that is both actively informed and participating, the processes that cultivate these characteristics are a subject of everlasting significance. This is because the survival of any democracy is dependent on the population.

A paradigm shift has occurred as an outcome of the absorption of social media into these processes, or more properly, the introduction of social media into these processes. Due to the existence of these platforms, the barriers that previously existed in terms of gaining access to information and expressing one's political beliefs have been greatly lowered. The process of content development and transmission has been democratised as a result of social media, which has made it easy for everyone who possesses a smartphone to become a broadcaster, a commentator, or an activist. A very small number of media gatekeepers, such as editors and news producers, used to hold a dominant position in the public realm in the past.

On the other side, however, this political picture that is made possible by digital technology is not a positive that is without any qualifications. The traits that make social media platforms such powerful tools for political action also present significant difficulties to the quality and integrity of democratic discussion. These issues are presented by the very characteristics that make social media platforms such powerful tools. There is a possibility that the architecture of these platforms, which is frequently driven by algorithmic curation with the intention of maximising user interaction, has the potential to produce "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles." This phenomenon takes place when behaviours that are low-cost and low-effort, such as liking or sharing a post, generate the sense of participation without translating into meaningful engagement in the actual world or significant comprehension. The major concern that this research strives to address is specifically this duality, which forms the primary issue. However, despite the fact that it is evident that social media is redefining political socialisation, the precise nature of the impact that social media has on the political awareness and civic activity of university students is still a complicated and disputed topic of inquiry. This is despite the fact that social media is redefining political socialisation. If students are continually exposed to political messages being created and shared on various platforms of social media, does this genuinely help their understanding of complex political issues, or does it merely create the illusion that they are educated without actually improving their understanding? Does the convenience of online engagement (for example, signing digital petitions and using hashtags) lead to a more meaningful offline participation, or does it serve as a substitute and quench the demand for civic action, resulting in a net decline in actual involvement.



Literature Review

To comprehend the level of impact of political messages, communicated and consumed through social media, on political behavior, it is indispensable to ground the inquiry in relevant communication and political theories. Noelle-Neumann's (1974) **Spiral of Silence Theory** posits that individuals are not much comfortable in expressing their thoughts and opinions if they have sensed that they are in the minority, for fear of social alienation. These movements are particularly powerful because they resonate with young adults. Furthermore, the idea of "networked publics" that was presented by Boyd (2010) is also an essential one. She describes them as publics that are recreated by digitalized network technologies; they are at the same time the place that is built by networked technologies and the imaginary community that come up as a result of the use of these technologies. She claims that these publics are reconstructed by networked technologies. Especially on social media platforms, which are networked publics, there is a continuous blurring of the distinctions between public and private, as well as between the political and the personal. This confusion is especially prevalent in the realm of politics. In the case of students attending universities, political information is not absorbed in a vacuum; rather, it is intertwined with content that pertains to social problems and cultural practices.

Boulianne (2015) carried out a comprehensive meta-analysis, in which she examined a significant number of studies and arrived at the conclusion that the association between the use of social media and political engagement is consistently positive, despite the fact that the effect sizes are often small. This was the result that she reached after conducting the meta-analysis. Because it incorporates political information into an environment that is centred on social contact, the findings of the study revealed that social media acts as a gateway, particularly for persons who had a low degree of interest in politics in the past. This is because social media integrates political information into such environments. The significance of this cannot be overstated, particularly for college students, whose social and political identities are typically intertwined with a great deal of other elements of their identities. The "social facilitation" hypothesis is another possible explanation for this impact, and it can explain it to a certain extent. There is a correlation between people seeing their friends and peers participating with political information online and the development of social norms that encourage more participation, according to research conducted by Invitak et al. (2011). When a student observes other members of their network engaging in activities such as discussing current events, fighting about a variety of issues, or stating that they have cast their vote, it creates a perceived social expectation for them to participate as well. When it comes to political conversation, it is feasible that the influence of peers can be a more powerful motivator than political rhetoric that comes from the top down. The importance of specific platform affordances has also been brought to light as a result of the study that has been conducted. According to Parmelee and Richard (2019), the real-time feed and hashtag architecture of Twitter make it particularly beneficial for broadcasting breaking news and following up with live political events. (Parmelee and Richard 2018). With this, users are able to improve their awareness of their surroundings. However, visual media platforms like Instagram and TikTok make use of emotional and personal storytelling, which has the ability to make complex political topics more approachable and accessible to a younger audience (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). This is because these



platforms use narrative that is both personal and emotional. In order to highlight this point, short-form films on TikTok have been employed to provide explanations of legislative legislation or historical context in a manner that is not only engaging but also simple to consume. There is a possibility that this will lessen the mental barrier that is related with the comprehension of political concepts.

Instead of presenting "social media use" as a single activity, the literature has made a significant step ahead by disaggregating it according to the type of activity and the purpose for which it is being used. This is a significant step forward. Researches consistently differentiate between "passive consumption" (such as scrolling through a news feed) and "active participation" (such as posting, commenting, and sharing). This distinction is created in order to better understand the differences between the two. According to Skoric et al. (2016), the forms of use that are more active and expressive are frequently more strongly connected with deeper cognitive engagement and offline participation. There is a possibility that consciousness can be raised through passive consumption; nevertheless, it is more likely that awareness will be raised through active and expressive forms of use. In a similar vein, the type of content that is experienced has a significant contribution to the moderating effect. There is a constant association between exposure to content that is rich in information and hard news and gains in political awareness and engagement in deliberative processes, as stated by Bode (2016). "Hard news" refers to content that contains a lot of information. On the other hand, being exposed to material that is usually referred to as "affective" or "emotional"—for instance, political memes, satire, and highly politicised rhetoric—can have a number of impacts. Here are some examples of such information. For young people who are not actively engaged in politics, political humour and satire (for example, from shows like *The Daily Show* or satirical accounts on Instagram) may serve as an entry point to politics, thereby strengthening their knowledge and interest in politics (Becker & Bode, 2018). On the other hand, political satire and humour from shows like *The Daily Show* may also serve as an entry point. Alternatively, a diet that is strong in such content may promote cynicism, reduce trust in democratic institutions, and place more emphasis on emotional reaction than on substantive understanding. These are all negative outcomes. The phenomena that is commonly referred to as "news-finding-me" perception, which was identified by Gil de Zúñiga and Weeks (2016), is particularly prevalent among younger users. Some people are under the impression that it is feasible to stay abreast of current events without actively seeking out news. They feel that they will discover relevant material by chance through their social media feeds, which leads them to assume that it is possible to do so. Despite the fact that this perception is linked to increased political participation, most likely due to the fact that it reflects a dense and information-rich network, it poses questions regarding the breadth, depth, and accuracy of the information that is being passively received.

Morozov (2009) sees the accusation of "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" as the third primary criticism that the movement is confronted with. We use this word to condemn low-effort, low-risk sorts of online assistance (such liking, sharing, or changing a profile photo), which require minimal personal involvement and have questionable impact in the real world with regard to their effectiveness. Examples of these types of support include liking, sharing, and changing a profile photo. There is a theory that slacktivism can lead to a moral licensing effect, in which individuals believe that they have "done their part" with



a simple click. As a consequence, they are less likely to engage in more demanding and significant forms of offline activism (Kristofferson, White, & Pelozza, 2014). This theory has been put forward as a potential outcome of slacktivism. To what extent does the activity that university students participate in online serve as a supplement to or a replacement for the action that they engage in in the genuine world? When it comes to the extent to which university students participate in civic life, this is a serious concern.

The atmosphere that prevails within the confines of the university itself is an essential background. According to Flanagan and Peter (2018), this particular historical period is a significant example of "political socialisation," which refers to the process by which individuals build political identities and habits that are enduring across time. The common idea of universities is that they are places where one can come into contact with a wide range of perspectives and participate in debates that are potentially confrontational. There is a possibility that social media could either enhance or interfere with the performance of this function. It has the potential to connect students to global concerns and opinions that extend far beyond the boundaries of the campus, but it also has the potential to allow them to retreat into digital cliques that duplicate or reinforce their offline social groups, which may restrict the intellectual challenge of confronting differences

Despite the fact that the body of literature that is currently available provides a strong foundation, there are still a number of gaps in the knowledge. It is possible that the findings cannot be fully generalised to other cultural and political settings, such as developing democracies, where the structures of the media ecosystem and the political cultures of young people may be different. This can be attributed to the fact that the majority of research is conducted in surroundings that are either located in North America or Europe. In the second place, research frequently lags behind the most recent trends because of the rapid growth of platforms. As an illustration, the political impact of platforms that are mostly based on visuals, such as TikTok and Instagram, is not as well recognised as the impact of platforms that are more text-driven, such as X. In the third place, there is a need for additional research that simultaneously explores both the good and negative potentialities. This is a prerequisite. For the purpose of gaining a knowledge of the contextual factors that contribute to a variety of results, this research ought to move beyond a binary "good versus evil" paradigm. This study intends to address the gaps that have been identified by conducting an investigation of the Nigerian university context, exploring a diverse set of platforms, and explicitly examining how different usage patterns (active versus passive, news versus satire consumption) and perceptual factors (such as perceived credibility, peer norms) mediate the relationship between social media use and the key outcome variables of political awareness and civic engagement. These are all ways in which the study intends to address the gaps that have been identified. It is thought that by doing so, it will be feasible to provide a more detailed and contextually nuanced knowledge of the ways in which college students are managing their duties as citizens in this day and age of digital technology. This is because the context in which these roles are being managed is more complex.

Gaps Found in the Literature and the Present Study

While the existing literature provides a robust foundation, several gaps remain. First, many studies are conducted in North American or European contexts, and



the findings may not be fully generalizable to other cultural and political settings, such as developing democracies where media ecosystems and youth political cultures may differ. Second, the rapid evolution of platforms means that research often lags behind the latest trends; for instance, the political impact of visually-dominated platforms like TikTok and Instagram is less understood compared to the more text-based X. Third, there is a need for more research that simultaneously examines both the positive and negative potentialities, moving beyond a binary "good vs. evil" framing to understand the conditional factors that lead to different outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive survey design was employed, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to students in public and private universities.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of undergraduate students from six universities. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 450 participants, ensuring representation across faculties and levels of study.

Data Collection Tools

A structured questionnaire was developed, comprising sections on demographic information, social media usage patterns, political awareness, and civic engagement. A 5-point Likert scale was used for most items.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models were employed to test hypotheses.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=450)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	240	53.3%
	Female	210	46.7%
Age	18-20	150	33.3%
	21-23	220	48.9%
	24+	80	17.8%
Faculty	Social Sciences	180	40.0%
	Sciences	140	31.1%



Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Arts/Humanities	130	28.9%

Description: Most of the students in the sample were between the ages of 21 and 23, and the gender distribution of the sample was well balanced. The majority of the students in the sample were college students. Students who were majoring in social sciences made up the significant portion of the student body.

Social Media Usage Patterns

Table 2: Frequency of Social Media Use

Platform	Daily Use	Several Times a Week	Rarely	Never
Facebook	60%	25%	10%	5%
Twitter	55%	30%	10%	5%
Instagram	70%	20%	5%	5%
TikTok	65%	20%	10%	5%

Description: Based on the findings, it was discovered that Instagram and TikTok were the platforms that were employed the most frequently, with over sixty-five percent of students using them on a consistent basis.

Political Awareness Levels

Table 3: Political Awareness Scores

Awareness Level	Low (1–2)	Moderate (3)	High (4–5)
Percentage	15%	40%	45%

Description: Although fifteen percent of the students shown a low degree of awareness, a little less than half of the students demonstrated a good level of political understanding.

Civic Engagement Activities

Table 4: Participation in Civic Activities

Activity	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Voting	50%	30%	15%	5%
Petitions	40%	35%	20%	5%
Protests	25%	30%	30%	15%
Community Service	35%	40%	20%	5%

Description: Participation in demonstrations was substantially less common among the public than voting, which was the most common form of civic



Relationship Between Social Media Use and Political Awareness

Table 5: Correlation Between Social Media Use and Political Awareness

Variable	Pearson's r	p-value
Facebook	0.45	0.001
Twitter	0.52	0.000
Instagram	0.38	0.005
TikTok	0.35	0.010

Description: It was discovered that Twitter has the most significant connection with political awareness, whereas other platforms demonstrated a positive correlation with political awareness.

Regression Analysis: Predictors of Civic Engagement

Table 6: Regression Model for Civic Engagement

Predictor	β	T	p
Social Media Use	0.32	4.50	0.000
Political Awareness	0.28	3.90	0.001
Age	0.15	2.10	0.036
Gender	0.08	1.20	0.230

Description: Social media use and political awareness were significant predictors of civic engagement, while gender was not.

Type of Content Consumed

Table 7: Types of Political Content Consumed

Content Type	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
News Articles	50%	30%	20%
Opinion Posts	45%	35%	20%
Memes/Satire	60%	25%	15%
Live Debates	30%	40%	30%

Description: Memes and satirical content were the most frequently consumed, while live debates were less common.



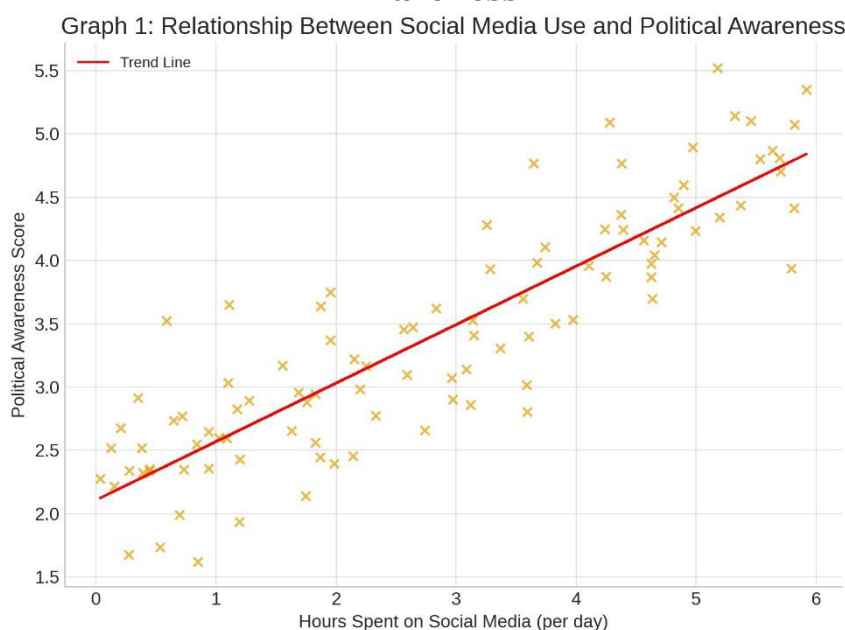
Perceived Credibility of Social Media News

Table 8: Perceived Credibility of News on Social Media

Credibility Level	Very Low	Low	Neutral	High	Very High
Percentage	10%	20%	30%	25%	15%

Description: Only 40% of students rated social media news as highly credible, indicating skepticism about information quality.

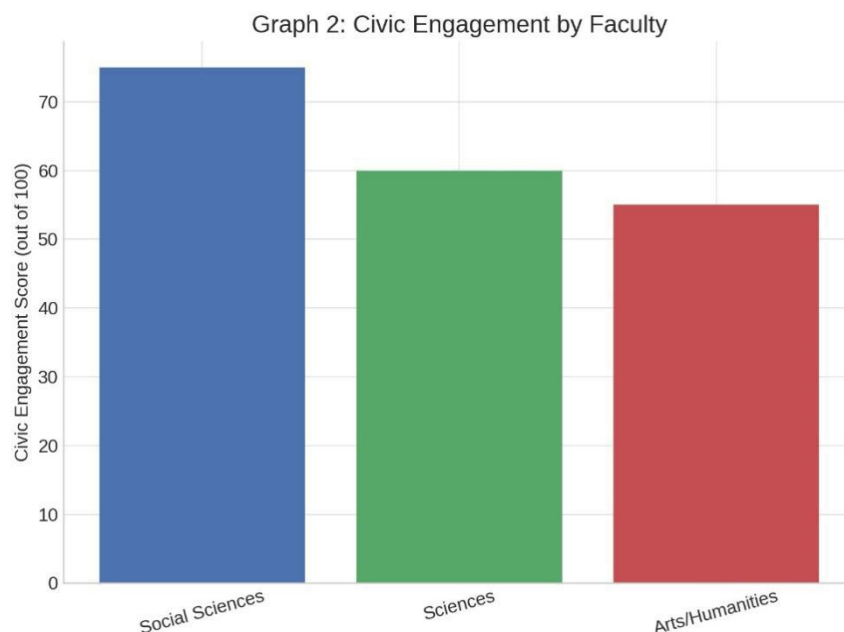
Graph 1: Relationship Between Social Media Use and Political Awareness



Description: A scatter plot showing a positive trend between hours spent on social media and political awareness scores.



Graph 2: Civic Engagement by Faculty



Description: A bar chart indicating that social science students reported higher levels of civic engagement compared to other faculties.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a picture that is both intricate and all-encompassing of the relationship that exists between the political lives of university students and the use of social media. The strong positive link that was established between the frequency of utilising social media and levels of political awareness (as mentioned in Table 5) provides major support for the "mobilisation" or "facilitation" perspective. This connection makes it possible for the perspective to be considered significant. The research undertaken by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) and Boulianne (2015), which implies that social media serves as an essential information equaliser for university students in Nigeria, yields a finding that is in agreement with this finding. In the setting of the media landscape, where access to traditional news channels that demand payment may be restricted, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook offer a stream of real-time information that is both free and easily accessible. This information is available in real time. In light of the fact that Twitter has a well-established reputation as a platform where public intellectuals, parliamentarians, and journalists may communicate news and comments, it should not come as a surprise that it has shown the strongest correlation. In addition to this, it acts as a wire service for a generation that is competent in the use of digital technology. Having said that, it is necessary to provide certain qualifications for this heightened awareness. The data presented in Table 7 demonstrates that a significant proportion of this "awareness" is communicated through a lens that is emotionally charged and frequently decontextualised. This is demonstrated by the strong consumption of satirical content and memes that are political in nature. Although Becker and Bode (2018) argue, quite rightly, that such information may serve as an interesting entry point into politics, our findings signal that there is a potential problem that could occur. This is because our findings suggest that there is a



possibility that can occur. The employment of these simplified and emotionally charged formats may contribute to the development of a type of awareness known as ersatz awareness, which is marked by a broad but superficial awareness. Students may be able to recognise political actors, slogans, and key disagreements; but, it is possible that they may not have a solid understanding of the institutional procedures, historical contexts, or policy issues that lie beneath the surface. This leads to a public that is politically "alert" but not necessarily politically "informed" in a deliberative sense. This distinction is significant for the quality of democratic discussion since it defines the extent to which the public is aware of political issues.

In accordance with the results of the regression analysis, which are presented in Table 6, the utilisation of social media platforms is a significant factor in predicting civic participation. Even after taking into consideration a variety of factors, including political expertise and demographic features, this remains the case. The low-cost and low-barrier nature of online engagement, such as sharing a post, joining a WhatsApp group for a cause, or following a political leader, appears to serve as a gateway that can, under the right circumstances, catalyse more substantive actions that take place offline according to Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) "Logic of Connective Action." This finding provides strong support for the aforementioned theory. According to Vitak et al. (2011), it is absolutely necessary to have a thorough understanding of this transition in order to have the social facilitation model. Students who observe their peers using social media to arrange a demonstration or tweet about their volunteer work generate a powerful social norm that legitimises and encourages participation in the activity. This norm is established when students watch their classmates utilising social media. On the other hand, the idea of "slacktivism" casts a shadow over these findings like a cloud of darkness. In spite of the fact that involvement in activities like as voting and signing petitions was relatively prevalent, the data shown in Table 4 reveals that participation in activities that required more effort, such as protests, was significantly lower. On the basis of this tendency, it would appear that there is a hierarchy of involvement, with certain students being able to satisfy their need to participate through the use of online activities. According to Valenzuela (2013), the most significant factor that has a mediating effect is whether or not the student's participation in online activities is connected to a feeling of collective efficacy and incorporated into their social identity. This is the most essential factor that has a mediating effect. It is a demonstration of a successful transition from connective to collective action that a hashtag like #EndSARS in Nigeria has grown from a conversation that took place online into a movement that is taking place offline and is organised. This indicates that the transition from connective to collective action has been effective. When, on the other hand, engagement begins and ends with a profile image filter, it most likely represents the kind of tokenistic involvement that Morozov (2009) describes as being problematic. This is because the filter changes the appearance of the profile image. As a result, the question that needs to be posed is not whether or whether social media leads to involvement; rather, it is what kind of engagement it supports and under what circumstances the sentiment that is expressed online turns into influence in the real world.

The broad distrust that exists with regard to the credibility of the news that is propagated on social media is one of the discoveries that is among the most worrying (Table 8). A widespread, and one could argue healthy, critical



awareness of the polluted information environment that they are a part of is demonstrated by the fact that only forty percent of students rated the material as having "high" or "very high" credibility. This suggests that their awareness is widespread. Despite the fact that they are aware of it, this does not necessarily imply that they are in possession of the methods and equipment required to traverse it in an effective manner. The pupils find themselves in a paradoxical situation in which they are heavily dependent on a source that they fundamentally distrust. This is the situation that they find themselves in under these conditions. Furthermore, it encourages the kind of pessimism that leads to citizens isolating themselves completely from the democratic process. One of the contributing factors that makes this credibility challenge even more difficult to deal with is the architecture of the platforms themselves, which favours the establishment of echo chambers through their design. Although this study did not directly map students' networks, the significant association between platform use and involvement with peers who share similar perspectives (a finding that is frequently found in the literature, such as Bail et al., 2018) suggests that students' political worlds are likely becoming more and more similar to one another. This is despite the fact that this study did not directly map students' networks. The algorithmic curation that gives precedence to content that is engaging frequently leads to content that is ideologically reinforcing, therefore limiting exposure to views that are counter to the dominant worldview. It is possible that as a consequence of this, one's perception of the political landscape may become skewed, the level of hostility that exists between various groups may increase, and compromise, which is the very basis of politics, may appear to be a betrayal of one's group identity. This is necessary in order to generate designs that contain a variety of perspectives.

This study is not without limitations. Its cross-sectional design allows for the identification of correlations but not definitive causal relationships. The use of self-reported data for engagement and awareness is susceptible to social desirability bias. Furthermore, the study was conducted within a specific national context, and the findings may not be directly transferable to other cultures with different political histories and media systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the expansion of social media platforms, the landscape of political awareness and civic activity among college students has been irrevocably changed. This is the conclusion that can be drawn from this. As a consequence of this, politics has become more approachable, immediate, and relevant to society as a whole. On the other hand, it has the potential to replace profound, deliberate comprehension with superficial, emotional awareness; to divide the public into hostile echo chambers; to disseminate false information while giving the appearance of legitimacy; and to entice users with the allure of slacktivism. These are all negative outcomes that could occur as a result of its use.

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