



Social Media and Its Impact on Political Participation Among Undergraduate Students in a Third World Country

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HOW TO CITE

Momita, S. A., & Hossain, M. S. (2026). Social media and its impact on political participation among undergraduate students in a third world country. *Development Compilation*, 19(2), 351–363. <https://bips.bd/journal>

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 25 July 2026
Revised: 10 August 2026
Accepted: 13 September 2026
Available online: 20 October 2026

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4.0

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of social media on political engagement of undergraduate students in a developing country. The design of the study was explanatory sequential mixed methods, combining survey-based data for 200 university students with qualitative interview data. Results indicate that social media significantly increases students' political awareness, knowledge about policies, and self-efficacy in relation to being a citizen, and that it is one of the major ways that students get political information. But there are significant limitations for those who wish to engage in active political expression, including misinformation, online harassment, cyberbullying, polarization, and a fear of repercussions on academic or personal levels. Therefore, social media creates interest in civics and digital vulnerabilities hinder open democratic discussion.

Keywords: Social media, Political participation, Undergraduate students, Developing country, Misinformation, Online harassment.

1. Introduction

Social media indicates portals that allow people to publish their thoughts, concepts, videos and more. Political participation, however, refers to the involvement of the public in the governance of the State, including their voting and decision making. In this study, we look at how the use of social media affects the political participation of undergraduate students in a developing country. While a link between social media and political engagement has been documented in past research, the studies have been conducted in developed nations, at election time, or among young people in general. There are still no conclusive empirical studies on the impact social media has on the political engagement of undergraduates in third-world settings in which the

distinct and diverse political, socioeconomic, and digital contexts may result in different engagement patterns. The study has filled this missing link by analyzing on how social media user affects political participation of the undergraduate students of third world country.

2. Methodology

The research design is a mixed- methods design to explore the effects of social media on political participation of undergraduate students in a third world country. A mixed-methods approach is suitable as it is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and offers a more holistic understanding of the research problem. This study has an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design. Firstly, data is gathered in quantitative mode via a structured tool (questionnaire). The quantitative findings are then further explained using qualitative interviews with selected participants. The target population are undergraduate students from Public and Private Universities. Using stratified random sampling, a sample of about 300–400 students can be drawn from the population to ensure representation of different universities, academic years and genders. For the qualitative phase 15-20 students can be selected by purposive sampling basis. The primary data are gathered using an instrument which is a structured questionnaire consisting of social media usage, political awareness, political engagement and political participation. In-depth interviews are held with students on their experiences, perceptions, and opinion to gain insight into how social media has impacted their political engagement. SPSS is used for analyzing quantitative data. Descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation describe the respondents' characteristics and inferential statistics such as correlation and regression analysis are used to investigate the relationship between social media use and political participation. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the qualitative interview data to identify common themes and patterns and interpret these. Your involvement in the study is voluntary. All participants are informed of consent prior to data collection. All respondents (and participants) identities remain anonymous and all information collected will be kept confidential and for academic research purposes only. The questionnaire is pre-tested for validity and reliability. The internal consistency is measured using Cronbach's Alpha. Qualitative research responses are validated by coding and cross-checking to ensure the results are as credible and trustworthy as possible.

3. Literature review

Social media involvement (SSMI) in politics (exposure, discussion, and consumption) is also found to significantly improve citizens' political involvement both offline and online among youth in urban India, mediated by political trust (Paripoornam and Gopal 2026). Sutrisno and Agustina (2026) proposed that digital citizenship plays a crucial role in fostering democratic citizenship by promoting wider political participation via social media; despite that, citizens' power to overcome misinformation, polarization, digital literacy, and moral awareness are important factors to consider in shaping the level of political participation. Hassan et al. (2026) suggested that social media has a great influence on political mobilization and voter participation, enhancing voter awareness of politics, disseminating election materials, and engendering voter participation in Niger State with an emphasis that online mobilization should supplement offline political mobilization for meaningful participation. According to Okoli et al (n.2026), social media had a positive impact on Nigerian youths in the 2023 general elections, as it enabled them to receive and share political information, enhancing their political engagement and socialization in Anambra State tertiary institutions. Bello et al. (2024) reported that social media played a significant role in the Nigerian undergraduates' access, production, and dissemination of political information during the 2023 Presidential Election that increased political awareness and knowledge, mobilized and empowered undergraduates to actively engage in Nigeria's electoral process. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) reported that consumption of news through social media has a significant impact on political participation and that political expression on social media is a key mediator between social media usage and online and offline political participation. According to Loader et al. (2014), social media has revolutionized political involvement of youths, giving them networked opportunities to civic engagement, political discussion, and interaction, which would relatively boost youths' involvement in democratic

processes. Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) identified high usage of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp by Nigerian youths for the purposes of political advocacy, campaigns, discussion and monitoring the electoral processes, and concluded that perceived usefulness, ease of use and computer self-efficacy were significant factors influencing their political involvement in the internet. Theocharis et al. (2023) concluded that social media like Twitter and Facebook have changed the nature of political involvement, including political involvement on social media that goes beyond civic and political participation. Halpern et al. (2017) discovered that the sharing of political content on Facebook and Twitter contribute to political engagement in different ways: Facebook increases collective political efficacy and Twitter increases internal political efficacy among individuals. Knoll et al. (2020) suggested the social media Political Participation Model, claiming that social media can foster political participation via psychological mechanisms, which are interdependent and linked to each other based on Goal Systems Theory, while also acknowledging the importance of contextual and individual predispositions on the strength of the relationship. Overall, social media did not play a significant role in electoral decisions during the 2010-2011 Dutch elections, but Effing et al. (2011) discovered that the more engaged politicians were on social media, the more electoral support they would receive, which points to the potential of using social media to promote political participation and party involvement. Khan et al. (2019) discovered that political interest and policy satisfaction are significant positive factors to improve online political participation among the university students of Pakistan and Malaysia; while the moderations effect of political knowledge was found different in both countries. Hassan et al (2016) discovered that Malaysian undergraduate students relied heavily on social media—especially Facebook—to gather political information, share their political views and improve their political comprehension, resulting in positive effects for their political engagement online. Zaheer (2016) discovered that time spent on Facebook for political purposes has a significant impact on the online and offline political participation of university students, while age and gender also play a part in determining levels of political participation. Mohamad (2018) indicated that the use of Facebook, interaction with political leaders, quality of political information, and political interest significantly increased offline political participation among youths, including their political knowledge, opinions, and voting. According to Ofei et al. (2024), social media has proven as an alternative medium for political participation by disseminating political information, engaging the general public in political discussions and mobilizing citizens in Nigeria though problems of misinformation, hate speech and privacy issues necessitate greater citizen media literacy and regulation. In this regard, Momeni (2017) contended that social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allow people to communicate with each other easily and offer opportunities for political activism and collective action, leading to more opportunities for political participation. Ahmad et al. (2019) identified that the majority of the university students in rural areas of Pakistan used social media to gain political information and awareness and those high levels of political efficacy due to using social media, led to political participation offline. Based on the Nigeria 2011 presidential election, Abubakar (2012) determined that the use of social media contributed to the widening of political participation as it gave citizens a platform to participate in political debates, communicate their viewpoints, and shape the democratic decision-making process beyond the confines of mainstream media.

While some studies have been conducted to explain positive relationship between social media and political involvement, previous studies have been done in one country like Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Malaysia and developed countries with little attention to undergraduates under the UG3 setting. Furthermore, little evidence exists from previous studies to understand the overall effects of social media on the political involvement of undergraduate students in developing country settings, as different studies have privileged specific aspects of social media or other mediating factors like political efficacy, political trust and political knowledge. Hence, it is the aim of this study to fill this gap by analyzing the effect of social media on political participation of undergraduate students in a third world country.

4. 4.Result and Discussion

4.1Gender

Of the 200 surveyed, 54.9% were females and 44.6% were males, with 0.5% not specifying their gender. The findings showed that there was a higher percentage of female respondents than male respondents. There was generally an even spread of gender, with just a slight bias towards females.

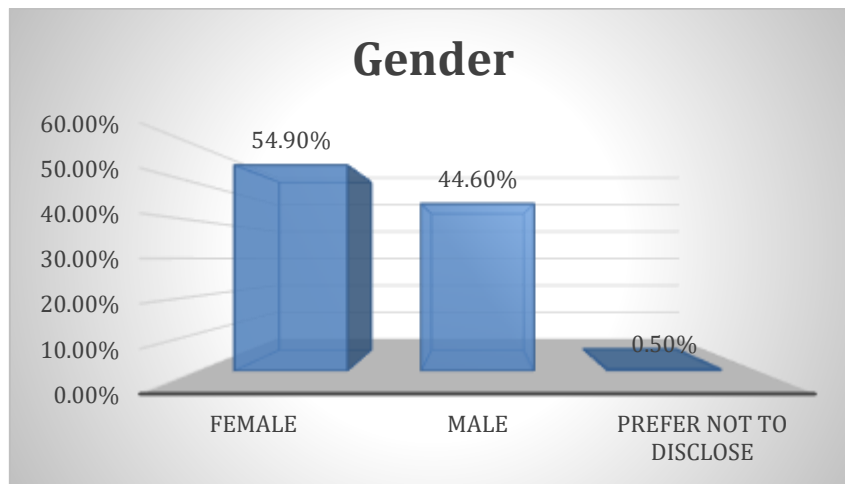


Figure 1. Source: Field Data 2026

4.2 Distribution of Respondents by Year of Study

The results show that first year students made up the largest group of students with 44.0% of the total of 200 students. 28.3% were second year and 22.3% were third year students. By contrast, 3.3% students were fourth-year and 2.2% students fifth year or higher. Overall, the results indicated that the respondents were mainly students with low years of university education.

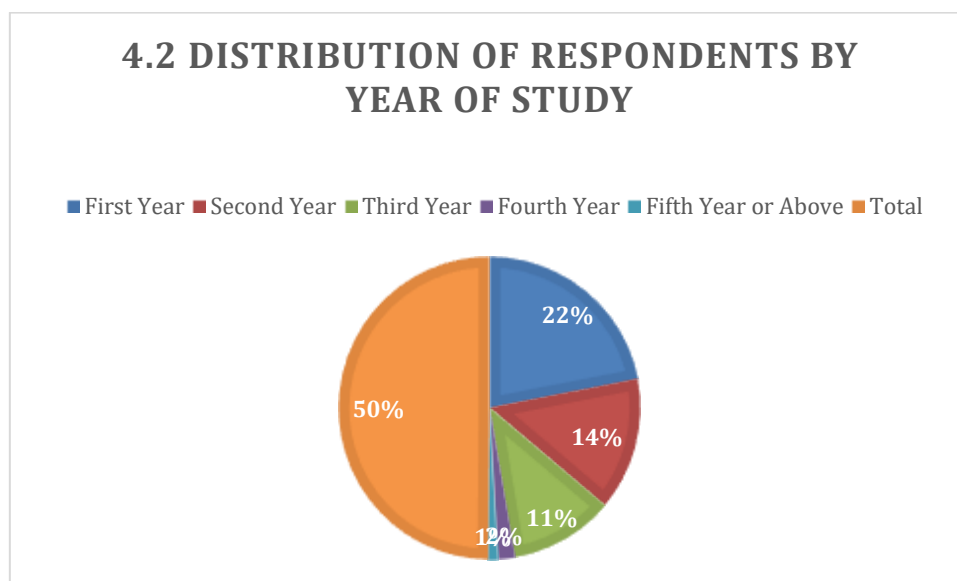


Figure 2. Source: Field Data 2026

4.3 Types of Universities Attended by the Respondents

The results show that 83.2% of the total respondents (200) were from public universities, which is the highest among the different universities. The other type of universities had 10.3% responses, and the private universities had 4.9% response. The students were mostly from public universities with only 1.6% from international ones.

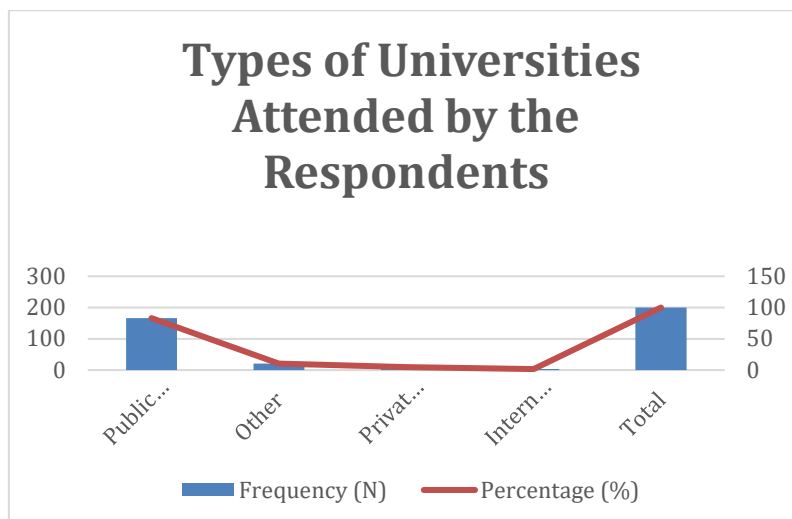


Figure 3. Source: Field Data 2026

4.4 Daily Engagement with Social Media

The results showed that 38.0% of all 200 respondents use social media 3–4 hours a day and this was the highest percentage. 25.0% of the respondents said that they spend more than 6 hours per day on social media and 23.0% said that they spend 5–6 hours per day. An additional 13.0% used the social media one to two hours a day and 1.0% used it less than one hour a day, suggesting that most people who responded to the survey spent a good amount of time on the social media daily.

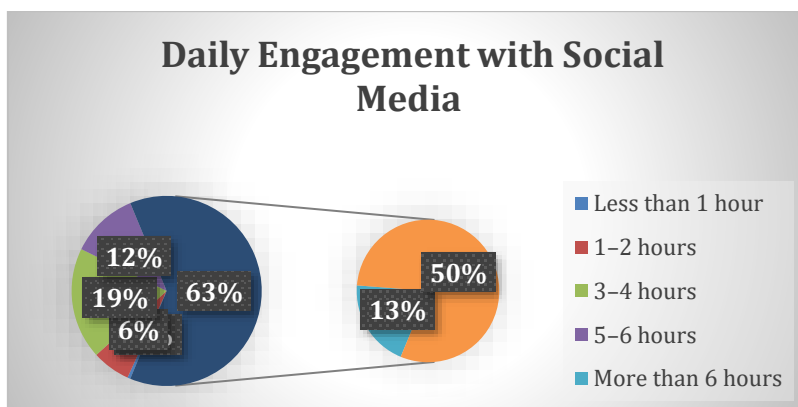


Figure 4. Source: Field Data 2026

4.5 Social Media and Political Information

The results show that the largest number of respondents were social media users (44.5%) with regard to getting political news or information sometimes among the 200 respondents. 19.5% said that they often used social media, 15.5% rarely and 9.5% very often to get information about politics. Rarely (2.0%) were the only respondents who never used the social media for political news, indicating the social media was a common source for political information amongst the respondents.

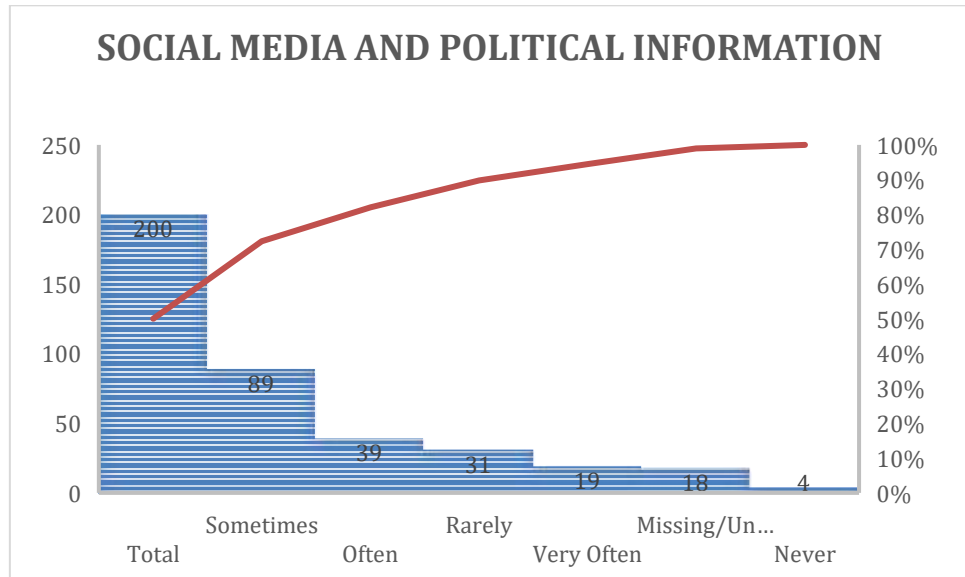


Figure 5. Source: Field Data 2026

4.6 Political News Exposure on Social Media

According to the results, 38.0% of the total 200 respondents agreed with the assertion that they see political news and discussion regularly on social media, while 34.0% were neutral. Meanwhile, 7.0% strongly disagreed with the statement, 21.0% disagreed. Overall, the results indicate that a significant number of the respondents regularly come across political news and discussion on social media.

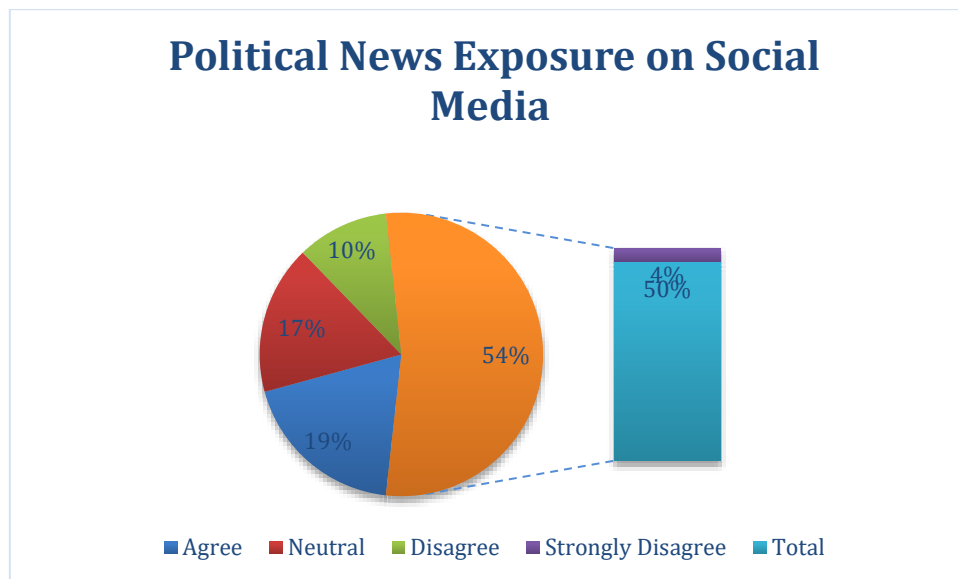


Figure 6. Source: Field Data 2026

4.7 Discussions Through Social Media

Findings show that from the 200 total respondents, 36.0% agreed that they share political or national matters with others via social media. Thirty percent and five-tenths remained neutral and 24.5% disagreed with the statement. Also, 6.0% strongly disagreed and 3.0% strongly agreed that social media creates an avenue for talking about politics.

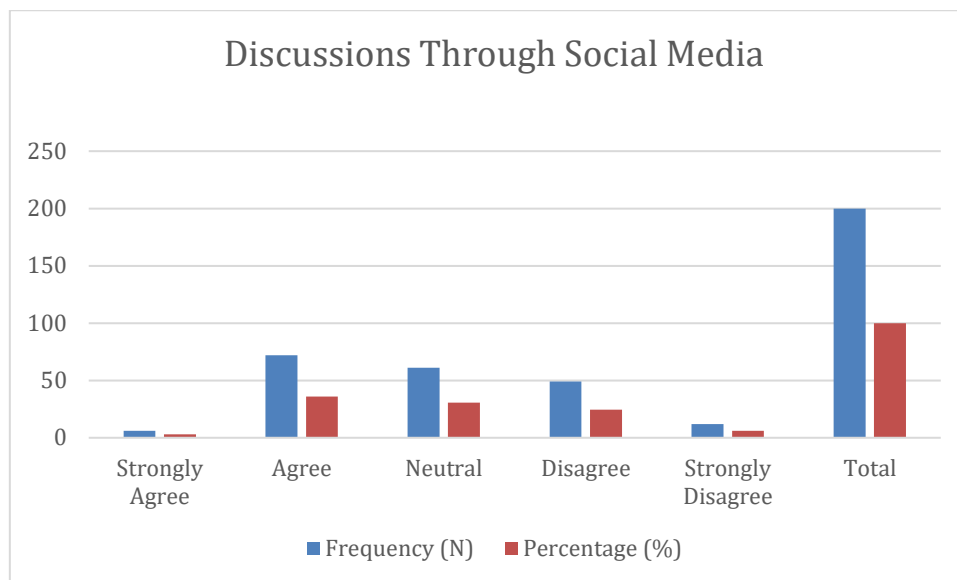


Figure 7. Source: Field Data 2026

4.8 Social Media and Political Knowledge

According to the results, out of 200 subjects in total, 55.0% agreed that political information in social media contributes to their knowledge on the national political issues while 25.0% were neutral. 13.0% strongly agreed, 6.0% disagreed and 1.0% strongly disagreed. The results in general show that social media is important in improving the knowledge and awareness of the respondents towards the political issues in the country.

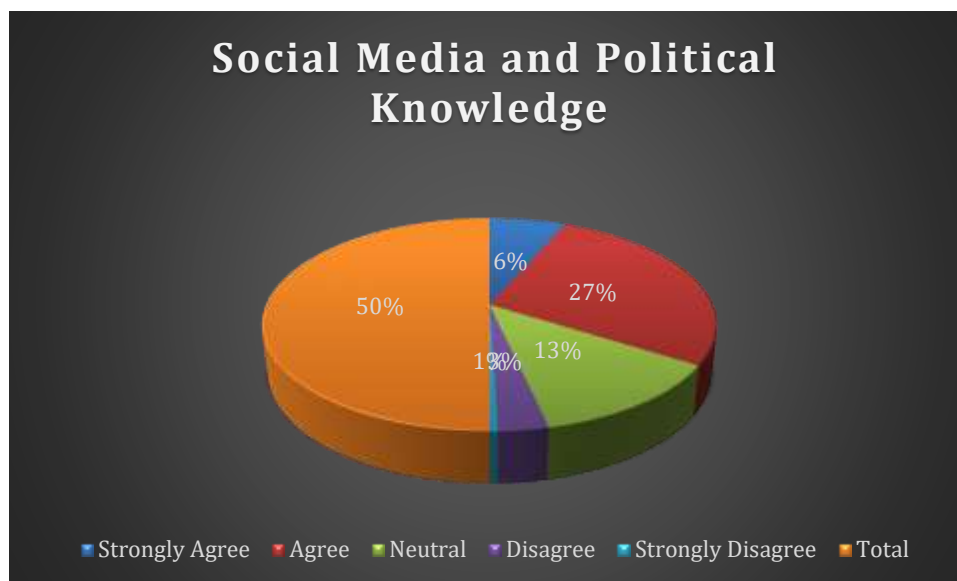


Figure 8. Source: Field Data 2026

4.9 Political Decisions Through Social Media

When asked if social media contributes to their understanding of the impact of political decisions on students and society, 117 out of 200 respondents agreed (58.5%) and 22 out of 200 respondents strongly agreed (11.0%). 43 (21.5%) were neither agreeing nor disagreeing with this statement. 10 (5.0%) strongly disagreed and only 8 (4.0%) disagreed while the majority of the respondents have a positive attitude towards the role of social media in understanding political decisions.

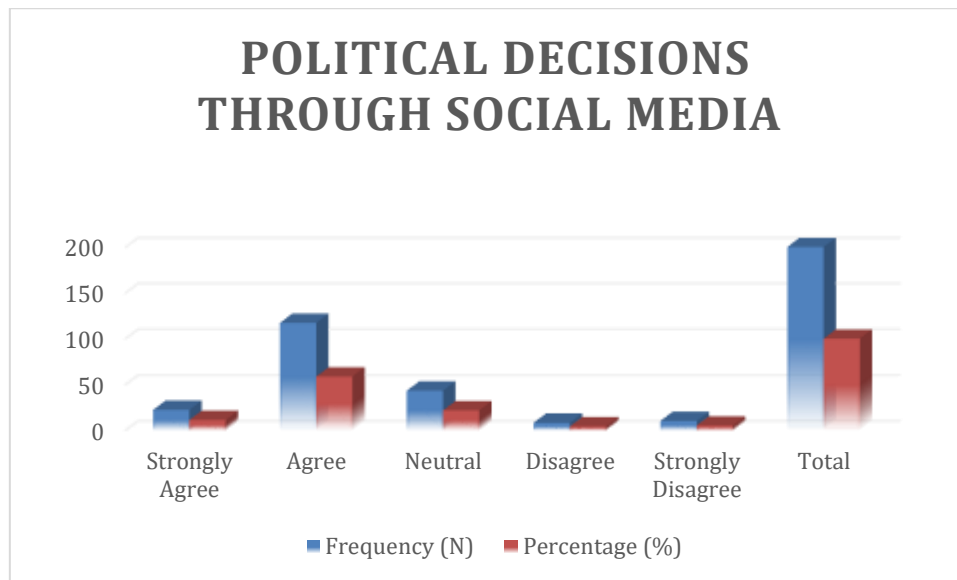


Figure 9. Source: Field Data 2026

4.10 Students' Political Influence on Public Decisions

Overall, 116 (58.0%) of the 200 respondents agreed and 29 (14.5%) strongly agreed that students' political opinions and involvement can have an impact on public decisions. Some 29 (14.5%) respondents were neutral, 4 (2.0%) disagreed and 3 (1.5%) strongly disagreed. The overall results suggest that most respondents think that students' political views and activities can impact public decisions.

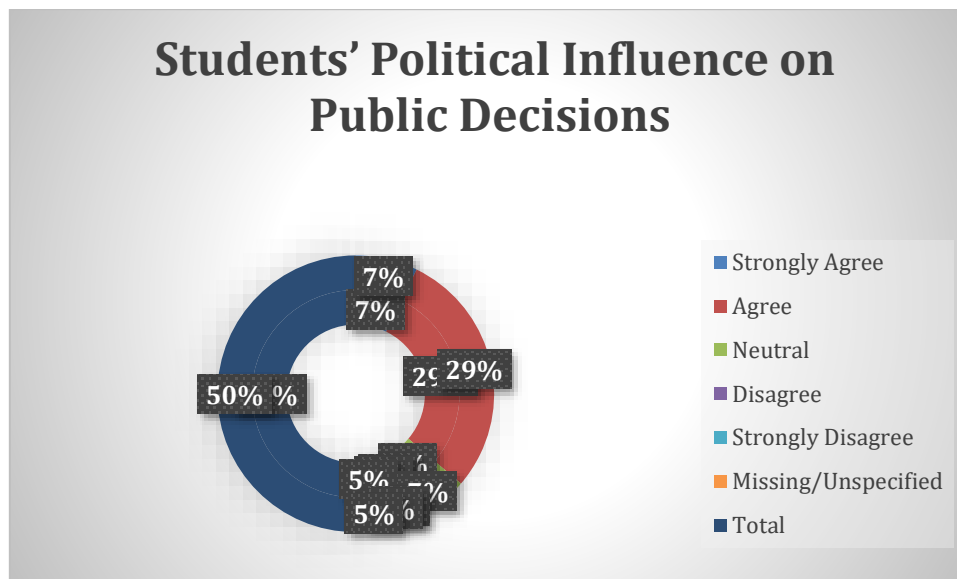


Figure 10. Source: Field Data 2026

4.11. Reliability of Political Information:

Among the 200 respondents, 43.0% agreed that they check the reliability of political information before believing or sharing it on social media, while 16.0% strongly agreed. The 21.0% of the respondents were neutral, while 8.5% disagreed and 2.0% strongly disagreed. Overall, 59.0% of the respondents agreed to checking the reliability of political information before believing or sharing it in social media.

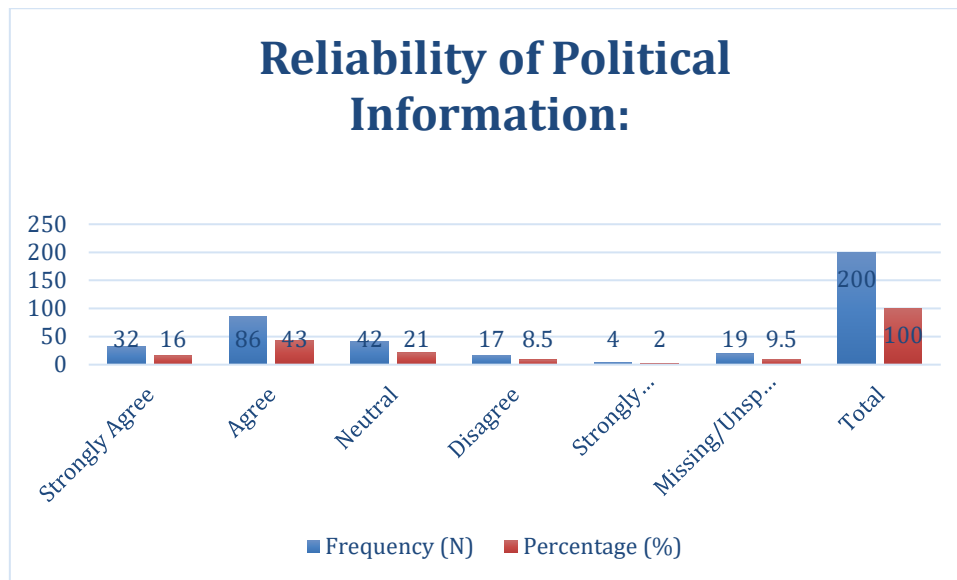


Figure 11. Source: Field Data 2026

4.12. Political Participation:

Of the 200 respondents, 41.0% agreed that political content on social media made them want to engage in political/civic activity and 6.0% strongly agreed. 32.0% were neutral, compared to 7.5% who disagreed and 4.5% who strongly disagreed. Overall, 47.0% of those who responded agreed that seeing political information on social media leads them to engage in political or civic activity.

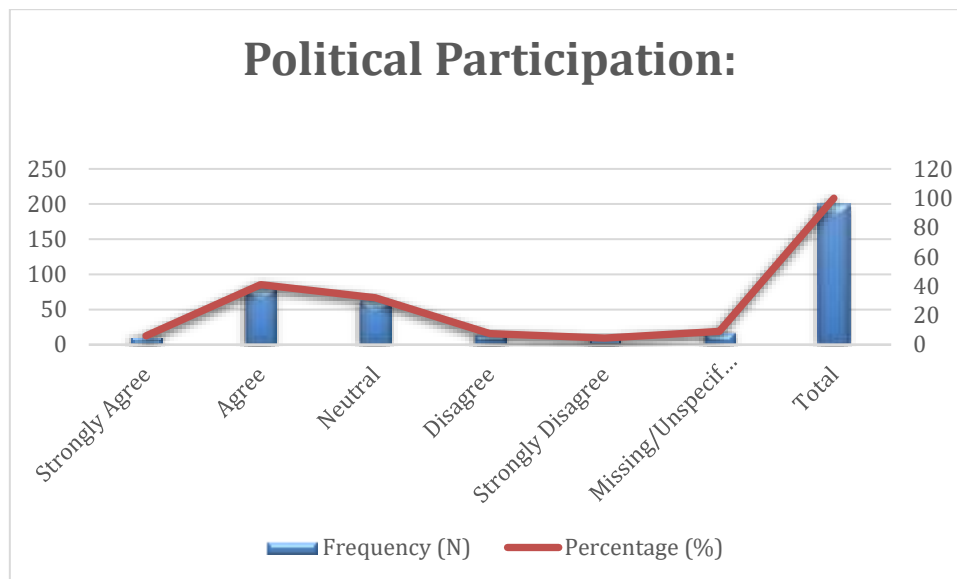


Figure 12. Source: Field Data 2026

4.13. Influence of Social Media on Political Interest and Participation:

61.0% of the 200 respondents indicated that social media had led to higher political interest and increased political awareness by making it easy to access political news, discussion and various perspectives. 18.0% said it made them more interested in politics, and more likely to take part in political discussions, political campaigns or other civic activity, and 13.0% said it made them somewhat less or not at all more interested in politics. Another 8.0% pointed to the negative impact of misinformation, confusion, bias and discouragement from political participation.

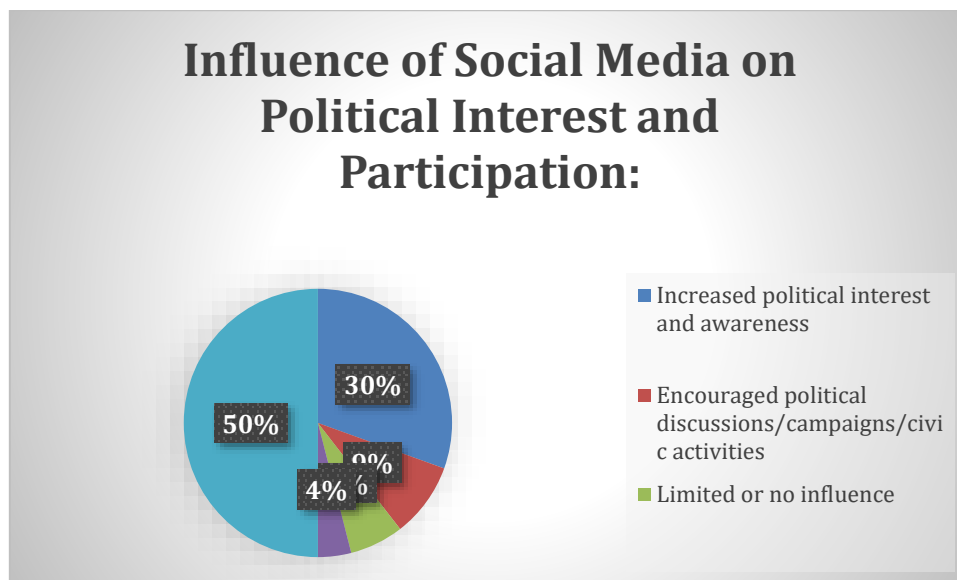


Figure 13. Source: Field Data 2026

4.14. Problems and Risks in Political Discussions:

In the 200 responses, 25.0% pointed to misinformation/fake news and 25.0% mentioned online harassment/cyberbullying. 15.0% mentioned privacy, security, threats and personal attacks, while 12.0% mentioned conflicts, political polarization and social pressure. Ten percent also cited academic, career or mental well-being related risks and 13 percent cited other concerns, such as time use, family pressure, or not being knowledgeable of risks.

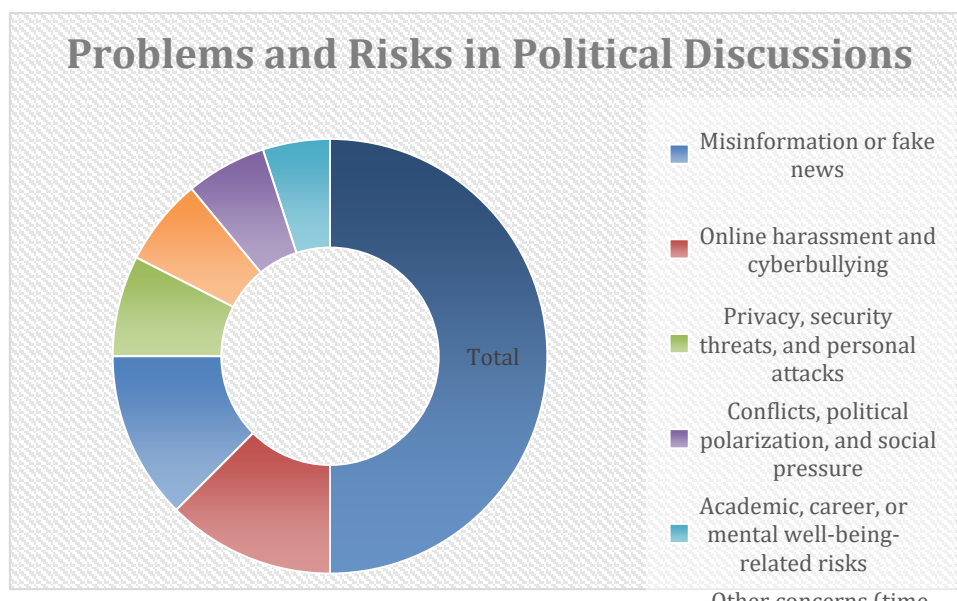


Figure 14. Source: Field Data 2026

4.15 Problems and Risks in Political Discussions: (qualitative data)

Political participation can be increased with the help of social media, but some students found them risky and stressful. Some of the most frequently mentioned concerns were harassment, cyberbullying, personal attacks and threats. Some responses were: “threats of life, education, any kind of part-time work, exposure of identity, harassment or stalking etc.”; and “Most of the time we face various harassment by political figure or follower.” One student also expressed concerns about false information and spreading unverified information, “it may be

biased and not necessarily true.” Students might be hesitant to voice their opinions due to privacy dangers, doxing or exposure of their personal identities. Disagreements about politics can cause conflicts, peer pressure, and other relationship difficulties between friends or family.

Others also referred to a potential fear of physical harm and influence by political parties or influential individuals. Participants associated political dialogue with stress, loss of study time, and potential loss of their study/career opportunity. The overall impression from the responses is that harassment and misinformation can deter students from freely speaking and political discussion online, and concerns about safety also can be a factor.

4.16 Problems and Risks in Political Discussions: (qualitative data)

The responses reveal that undergraduate students perceive there to be risks to personal, social, and academic lives in political discussion on social media. Most common concerns reported are online harassment and cyberbullying, which may manifest as harmful comments, trolling, personal attacks and/or threats. One respondent described this worry as “Security issue” and another said that he or she had to cope with “various harassment by political figure or follower.” Students also are concerned that misinformation and fake news can cloud political dialogue and allow them to less easily determine what is credible. Arguing, polarization and conflict with peers and/or groups can occur around political disagreements. The fact that posts can be widely disseminated and concerns about privacy increases the vulnerability of students. Some answers indicated that students do not feel free to voice their opinions because of concerns over damage to their current and future academic and employment reputations. Some participants feel that when they become involved in politics, it has a negative impact on student learning or future employment, some never get involved in political activities. A smaller number described the dangers of their accounts being limited, of not being safe and of being threatened by political opponents. Given the responses as a whole it would appear that perceived risks may dampen students' enthusiasm to express their views openly even if they want to.

5. Conclusion

Through this study, it has been proven that social media is not only an inescapable medium for political socialization but also is a medium that is needed for awareness and mobilization for undergraduate students in a developing country context. The empirical results indicate that digital platforms certainly promote students' knowledge about national issues and their feelings of empowerment about their influence over public decision making. However, this online interaction is like a double-edged sword. It makes information more accessible for citizens in politics but because of the fake news, toxic polarization, doxing and severe online harassment, the environment for open participation and free expression in the internet is more intimidating. Overall, social media can be a strong catalyst for student political consciousness, but its democratic potential cannot be fully realized until the structural risk and danger on social media can be effectively resolved, as well as digital hostility and information credibility.

6. Recommendations

Higher education institutions and policy makers need to join together to implement extensive digital literacy and civic education programs and teach students key fact-checking skills, cybersecurity and constructive digital communication. Furthermore, it is necessary for university authorities and political entities to build up a strong institutional safety regime and anti-cyberbullying measures to protect the minds of students from targeted intimidation, cyberbullying or retaliatory academic consequences due to their political views. The current capabilities of automated moderation tools and transparency of reporting need to be enhanced by social media platforms to curb the spread of fake news and hate speech in local contexts. Last, it is important that deliberative space, that is safe and moderated, be created within student organizations and youth platforms to connect the online political dialogue to meaningful civic and democratic actions offline.

7. Limitation of the study

The main limitation of this study is with the composition and number of the sample, as the quantitative analysis was limited to 200 undergraduate respondents, with the majority of these from public universities and from earlier years of study, meaning that the findings were not easily transferable to a wide variety of institutions, disciplines, and year groups. Finally, because the data are self-reported, risks include that the data might be biased toward social desirability, particularly in regard to political views and one's own experience of online harassment. The study is yet another limitation due to its cross-sectional nature, as it only reflects student views and actions at one moment in time, and not changes over time or at significant moments in the electoral process. Finally, the research focuses on features of social media in general, rather than specific affordances of particular social media (e.g., Facebook, X, or WhatsApp), which would be likely to affect different types of political behaviors.

8. Conflict of authors

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

No funding is available.

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