

Online Activism to Ground Action: A Study of Youth Participation in Environmental Conservation in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Social media is often used as a tool for environmental activism. However, the effectiveness and influence of social media in turning online engagements into offline actions among the youth in Arunachal Pradesh are uncertain. To understand the potential power of social media to turn online interests in environmental conservation into real-world actions, this study examines the effectiveness of social media in engaging young people in environmental activism in Arunachal Pradesh. The study offers important insights on how social media can be effectively utilized for environmental awareness, and how such online engagements lead to offline actions among youth in the twin capital city of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Online Activism, Environmental Conservation, Youth Participation, Online-to-Offline Action.

INTRODUCTION

Over time, society has evolved through population growth, changes across sectors, environmental shifts, and revolutionary advances in technology. With the advent of technology, social media plays a vital role in shaping the world into a better place. Social media platforms allow new spaces to connect, interact, communicate, and engage on different issues, especially among the Youth. Social media has managed to give youth the power to speak their mind. As youth help build a nation, they have the power to help a country develop and progress. Similarly, the advent of online activism has empowered individuals and organizations to organize, educate, and advocate for environmental protection and conservation of the environment more than ever before.

However, environmental issues have become one of the most immediate and major global concerns. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and the unsustainable use of resources pose grave threats to the planet's ecosystems and human health. Informed and motivated by these concerns, governments, international authorities, and grassroots organizations have taken steps to raise public awareness of these problems and to encourage sustainable and eco-friendly practices internationally. Particularly, the younger generation has played a major role in this, using various social media sites to share information about the problem, organizing rallies and demonstrations, and urging one another to act constructively.

Arunachal Pradesh, known for its plentiful biodiversity and natural resources, also faces various environmental issues, e.g., deforestation, climate change, pollution, and so forth. Traditional forms of activity and attempts to make people aware of environmental issues have undeniably contributed to conservation efforts. Still, the presence of social media has also changed the face of environmental

activism. However, the question of whether social media can effectively turn online involvement into offline action, particularly amongst the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, is more difficult and unclear. The study aims to examine the effectiveness of social media in engaging the youth in the environmental activities of Arunachal Pradesh. It seeks to understand the effectiveness of social media in translating online awareness about environmental conservation into action on the ground. The objectives of the study are therefore: 1) To identify how the youth of Arunachal Pradesh are using social media to promote awareness about environmental conservation in the twin Capital cities (Itanagar & Naharlagun) of Arunachal Pradesh. 2) To find out whether possible online participation can provide a basis for participation in real events.

Social networking sites provide a platform to discuss the burning issues that have been overlooked in today's scenario, Shabir et al., (2014). Mayfield (2008) defines social media as a group of online media where participation and openness allow global interaction. The author emphasizes the opportunity for everyone to make content publicly available and identifies this feature as one of the main factors behind social media's success and popularity. According to him, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram allow users to create and share content on a variety of topics. Likewise, according to Ndlela & Mulwo (2017), with the increasing accessibility of smartphones and mobile Internet, social media has become an important part of young people's everyday lives.

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991) also highlights how social media can influence our intentions and our sense of control over our actions, ultimately leading to more environmentally friendly behaviors, like cutting down on plastic use or participating in community clean-ups. Therefore, this indicates that frequent exposure to eco-friendly messages on social media can help establish lasting, sustainable habits. Thus, social media plays a significant role in shaping our behaviors based on societal norms, where individuals often look to their peers for guidance. According to Cialdini et al. (2006), when people observe their friends engaging in environmental activism, they are more likely to get involved themselves, driven by social proof and peer influence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs netnography observations over 3 months from May 2025 to July 2025, to examine interaction patterns and evidence of organized events on a Facebook page, Youth Mission for Clean River-Arunachal Pradesh, which is a Non-Profit organization established in 2016 works at the forefront of river conservation in Arunachal Pradesh, mobilizing youths with regular clean-ups, awareness drives, and collaborations to nurture a healthy environment for generations to come, and The Himalayan Clean Up-Arunachal, a WhatsApp Group was created for Mobilization and the Coordination for the nationwide clean-up drives among the Youth of Arunachal Pradesh. The data were analyzed by using manual thematic analysis. Also, an online survey among the youth (mostly the volunteers) from Itanagar and Naharlagun, the twin capital cities, was conducted to measure offline realities under the themes such as Theme 1: social media as a tool for environmental awareness among the youth. Theme 2: From online engagement to offline action.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Theme 1: Social Media as a Tool for Environmental Awareness among the Youth.

According to an online survey conducted among the youth, 63 responses were received, and out of 63 respondents, 34.9% occasionally come across environmental content, such as climate change and

conservation, on social media. Very frequently, this occurs in only 15.9% of cases, while 28.6% of respondents say it happens frequently, and 20.6% of respondents have come across environmental content rarely on social media. The data shows that the youth in Twin Capital City do not continuously stay informed about environmental issues on social media. Also, the majority of the respondents selected neutral when asked about engaging with environmental posts by sharing, liking, or commenting. While 27% of the respondents responded as somewhat likely, and the least number of respondents chose very likely, this indicates that young people tend to observe rather than actively interact with environmental posts on social media. However, those positive respondents chose to create a positive change while participating in an environmental campaign on social media.

Theme 2: From Online Engagement to Offline Action.

The findings show that the majority of the respondents participated in an environmental activism campaign or movement, either online or offline, inspired by social media. At the same time, 46% reported no involvement. Those who participated contributed by sharing or reposting content on social media, and secondly, by volunteering for an environmental organization, by signing petitions, and by attending virtual or in-person protests/rallies and donating to environmental causes as well. This indicates that respondents get inspired to take part in environmental action through social media, reflecting it as a source of motivation and awareness-building. Whereas non-participant respondents suggest that, even though social media is effective in motivating some individuals, not necessarily work for all users. When asked about changing their lifestyle habits, some respondents changed their lifestyle by reducing plastic use, recycling, and using less water, whereas others have chosen to do so sometimes. Thus, the results indicate that the impact of social media on youth, while changing behavioral action, is moderate. Furthermore, 49.2% of the respondents participated in collective actions for environmental protection that they learned about through social media. While almost the same percentage of the respondents (50.8%) have not. Additionally, those respondents who participated in the collective actions have mostly taken part in collective actions such as tree planting activities, followed by Community clean-up events, awareness campaigns, and plastic waste reduction challenges. This indicates that social media does play a partial but meaningful role in mobilizing for the protection and conservation of the environment amongst the youth. Moreover, 46% of the respondents find social media to be an effective tool in encouraging collective action for environmental protection, while 14.3% of the respondents find it very effective, and 33.3% remain neutral. Thus, the result indicates that social media plays a significant role in spreading awareness and motivation amongst the youth of Arunachal Pradesh.

Analysis of Facebook Page-Youth Mission for Clean River- Arunachal Pradesh

The Facebook page Youth Mission for Clean River - Arunachal Pradesh, being the forefront of river conservation in Arunachal Pradesh, actively contributes to the betterment of society by mobilizing youth through river clean-ups, tree planting, and awareness campaigns. After observing the page consecutively for three months, the study found that most of the posts were on creating awareness among the young followers about clean-up drives, waste management, and tree plantation through campaign posters, images, and videos. Followed by mobilizing the followers/volunteers to join the drives and receiving higher engagement, especially from the youth actively participating in real-world action. The page also engaged in advocacy, drawing attention to issues regarding river pollution and waste management by involving the concerned authorities to take action for the betterment of society. Thus, the analysis revealed that the Facebook page not only raises awareness on the environment, but also plays an important role in

coordinating young people in offline environmental initiatives and bridging civic advocacy and real-world activism.

Analysis of WhatsApp Group- The Himalayan Clean-up Arunachal

Since the purpose of this WhatsApp Group was solely for mobilization and coordination among volunteers, there were a few messages related to awareness. After observing the group consecutively for three months, it has also been noticed that the constant encouragement messages contributed to strong community building amongst the members of the group, which helped maintain long-term participants. Additionally, an appreciation message after a successful drive kept members motivated. Thus, a WhatsApp group played an important role as both an organizational and motivational platform, translating from online activism to offline action.

Conclusion

Findings from an online survey and Netnography observations on a Facebook page and a WhatsApp group reveal that young people tend to act as observers rather than actively interacting with environmental posts on social media. According to the findings, messages about environmental issues need to be shared more often on social media, since many youths do not continuously stay informed about environmental issues on social media. However, some youth chose to create a positive change and take part in an environmental action prompted by social media, along with changing their lifestyle habits. Moreover, the study also revealed that some youth took part in collective action, such as tree planting and clean-up drives, which they learned about through social media. Thus, social media does play a partial but meaningful role in mobilizing for the protection and conservation of the environment amongst the youth. Social media platforms such as Facebook played as awareness and mobilization tools, whereas WhatsApp acts as a coordination space for event organization. Thus, these analyses conclude that social media can be effectively utilized for environmental awareness, and it can turn online interests in environmental conservation into real-world actions among youth in the twin capital city of Arunachal Pradesh, though active involvement of youth in both online and offline engagement requires continuous encouragement and awareness on social media.

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