

From Screens to Streets: Exploring the Relationship Between Social Media and Offline Activism among the College Students

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Abstract

The research delves into the intricate dynamics of social media activism among college students in Kerala. The study employs a quantitative survey-based methodology with a sample size of 500 student participants. The prime focus of the research is to ascertain the relationship between students' participation in social media activism and their engagement in offline activism. The study identifies a positive correlation between these variables, shedding light on the interconnectedness of virtual and real-life forms of activism.

The findings suggest that the increasing prevalence of social media platforms has significantly altered the activism landscape among college students in Kerala. As students use these social media platforms to express their opinions, mobilise support, and disseminate information, a palpable impact is observed in their offline activism endeavours. The positive correlation underscores the potential of social media as a catalyst for real-world engagement, emphasising the importance of considering both virtual and physical realms in understanding contemporary activism dynamics.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on the role of social media in shaping societal participation, particularly among the student community. The implications of the study extend beyond the specific context of Kerala, providing valuable insights for academicians, policymakers, and activists interested in understanding the evolving nature of activism in the digital age. As the study navigates through the complex interplay between online and offline realms, it offers a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted ways in which

college students in Kerala harness the power of social media to drive meaningful change in their issues of interest.

Key Words: Social Media, Activism, Students. Online Activism

Introduction

The emergence of Internet technologies and social media platforms has brought about substantial transformations in human interactions. The influence of social media on the formation of public opinion is significant. Social media activism has emerged as a potent instrument for effecting social transformation. It offers a more expansive platform for engaging in conversations and contemplations pertaining to diverse subjects throughout society. At the micro level, social media can alter an individual's view, while at the macro level, it has the potential to overthrow the government. Since the Arab Spring uprising, social media platforms have served as catalysts for social change, reshaping the landscape of contemporary activism worldwide (Tudoroiu, 2014). Starting from the fight against corruption with the #JanLokpal movement and the mobilisation of youth during the #Nirbhaya protests, the Indian social media landscape has witnessed an explosion of social media activism, challenging entrenched power structures and amplifying marginalised voices (Kaur & Kaur, 2013). Various campaigns like the #MeToo India, #JusticeforAsifa, #FarmersProtests, #Justiceforwalayarsisters, #RejectCAA and NRC, and #Savelakshadweep rose to prominence through the diligent use of social media. In the contemporary era, many diverse societal issues, ranging from gender inequality, corruption, anti-rape protests, and environmental protection, have been extensively discussed on social media platforms, consequently becoming integral components of the burgeoning phenomenon of social media activism.

Now, the hashtag carries the weight of a protest sign, whereas a retweet holds the power of a slogan. This is the reality of contemporary activism, where the virtual realm has transcended its digital boundaries to permeate the very fabric of our societies. In this realm, the dichotomy between online activism and offline action blurs, giving rise to a new era of activism characterised by fluidity and interconnectedness. In the digital age, where a mere click can spark global conversations and ignite movements, the intersection of social media activism and traditional offline activism has become a subject of intense scrutiny.

However, amid the fervour of online advocacy, questions arise regarding its efficacy and impact on real-world change. Can a social media post truly change the policy decisions of the government? Does a social media viral post translate into tangible action on the ground? As researchers and activists alike grapple with these questions, a deeper understanding of the relationship between social media activism and offline protests becomes imperative.

Students have a crucial impact on social media activism because they possess the innate capacity to organise and amplify voices on an international scale. Their proficiency in utilising digital media allows them to swiftly disseminate information, leading to increased awareness and initiating discussions on key societal matters. The distinctive socio-cultural environment of Kerala, along with its extensive internet usage and well-educated young population, provides an excellent opportunity to investigate social media activism among college students.

Henceforth, we articulate our primary research objective.

1. To check whether there is any relationship between social media activism and offline activism among the students of Kerala.

Review of literature

Social Media Activism and Offline Activism

Social media activism encompasses activities promoting social and political causes through various digital platforms. These actions can vary in their levels of complexity and engagement. On one end of the spectrum, we find feel-good symbolic signalling, where individuals may express their stance on a politicised issue by making simple gestures, such as changing their social media profile picture. On the other hand, there are more complex types of interaction, such as creating in-depth blogs that offer comprehensive perspectives and spread awareness of societal concerns. Through this wide range of online activism, people can express their opinions and concerns in the digital sphere while participating to the extent of their comfort and resource availability (Gomez & Kaiser, 2019). Social media platforms are crucial for supporting online activism through three main mechanisms. In the first place, they offer a forum where people can publicly express their own experiences and viewpoints, linking them to more significant, more universal concerns like the Me Too movement. This allows people to express their opinions, participate in ongoing discussions, and draw attention to incidents of injustice or prejudice. By making use of social media's accessibility and reach, individuals may strengthen their voices and create a feeling of community, ultimately working to increase awareness and promote social change (Bogen et al., 2021). Second, social media allows online communities to encourage each other, organise actions, and address unfavourable responses to their activity. These digital platforms enable activists to form virtual communities, share

resources, and support each other. Social media also allows activists to organise rallies, marches, and campaigns and reach more people. Online activists can use these channels to rebut negative responses, expose disinformation, and foster healthy dialogue. Social media allows activists to form resilient networks, coordinate their actions, and actively respond to challenges (Matthes et al., 2018). Third, Online activists can engage diverse groups on social media to negotiate and share new realities. Activists use internet connectedness to employ individuals from diverse backgrounds in social change. Social media spreads information and builds networks through sharing experiences. This inclusive approach promotes co-creation, alternate perspectives, empathy, and understanding. Social media fosters collaboration and a more egalitarian future (Turley & Fisher, 2018).

Social Media Activism is closely integrated with offline action, as online platforms facilitate the organisation of protests (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). The current scenario has led to a new form of connective action, where mobilisation spreads through interconnected personal networks, allowing mass protests without formal structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). While social media significantly enhances communication, similar bottom-up protests have occurred throughout history using different communication methods. Studies of past events suggest that communication dynamics play a role similar to today's social media. Despite the extensive literature on the subject, divergent perspectives persist within scholarly discourse.

The Negative relation

The negative relation hypothesis states that online activism negatively influences offline action (Greijdanus et al., 2020). At the early stage, researchers dismissed online activism as slacktivism, an effortless and unproductive form of activism. They consider offline activism as a more effortful and productive form of activism. However, later, this view was criticised for its simplistic reasoning (Halupka, 2018). Online activism affects offline protest if activists

believe their actions online are practical enough to change the situation. Effortful online efforts like making films and organising events can also be taken offline. When activists remove themselves from offline actions, hostile relations might result (LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2018). Online and offline actions can support each other during planning, mobilisation, reporting, framing, and post-action review. Still, some studies suggest that online activism replaces offline activity (Lim, 2013).

Inconsistent relation

Some researchers observed that the online and offline protests are neither negatively nor positively related. We can understand this phenomenon through the lens of three concepts. 1, Digital divide; 2, Spiral of silence and Echo chamber effects; and 3, Digital dualism. First, people engaging online differ from people who protest offline. For example, due to technological incompetence, working-class people may be less politically active online (Adams et al., 2018). Younger people are more active online, while older people are not (Hoffmann & Lutz, 2021). The Spiral of silence is another issue that causes an inconsistent relationship between online and offline action. The concept explains that people self-censor unpopular opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). It is vital in both online and offline contexts (Matthes et al., 2017). Online echo chambers and like-minded networks can also influence online activism. With features like quick unfriending, social media may create echo chambers that validate shared perceptions (Sasahara et al., 2020). The third concept of digital dualism shows that people behave differently online than offline. Online anonymity lets people express themselves without fear of societal judgment (Suler, 2004).

Positive Relation

Many researchers identified a positive relationship between online and offline activism (Boulianne, 2015; Chae et al., 2019). Research demonstrates that online activism could lead to

offline protests. Small-scale online activism can lead to more intensive offline activism. The first-hand exposure to like-minded people and collective identity created through online platforms can help this transition from virtual to actual action. Online protests help people gain confidence, skills, and networks to participate in offline protests, where they may more directly support their cause. Thus, online activism may mobilise people, ease their transition into offline activities, and boost social movement participation (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2018).

By undertaking the research, we seek to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field and offer valuable insights to inform future scholarly endeavors.

Research Methodology

The present study used a quantitative research methodology to investigate the correlation between social media activism and offline activism among college students in the state of Kerala. The research employs a stratified random sample methodology in order to guarantee the inclusion of diverse colleges throughout the state of Kerala. Stratification entails the process of categorising the target audience, specifically college students, into separate subgroups according to pertinent factors such as geographical location, kind of institution, and academic domains. The researcher divides the state of Kerala into three zones. 1. Northern Kerala, 2. Southern Kerala, and 3. Central Kerala. Kasargode, Kannur, Malappuram, Wayanad, and Kozhikode districts are in northern Kerala. Trivandrum, Kollam, Alappuzha, and Pathanamthitta districts are in southern Kerala. The Palakkad, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Idukki districts are under Central Kerala. Two districts from each zone have been selected. Wayanad, Kozhikode from the North, Palakkad, Ernakulam from Central and Trivandrum and Kollam from the South. From each selected district, the researcher selects three colleges that include urban, semi-urban and rural institutions. Participants are selected using random sampling within each stratum. A sample size of 500 participants is considered adequate for

attaining statistical significance and ensuring the generalizability of the results. The primary data-gathering instrument employed in this study is a structured questionnaire. The survey consists of close-ended questions that have been specifically intended to assess variables pertaining to social media activism, offline activism, and demographic attributes of the participants. The questionnaire collects the participants' Social Media Activism and Offline Activism. The Instruments to measure Social Media Activism and Offline Activism are taken from the study of Myoung Gi Chon and Hyojung Park (Chon & Park, 2020) with their permission and modified according to the Indian context. Prior to full-scale adoption, the questionnaire undergoes a pilot test to evaluate its reliability and validity. Ethical considerations such as obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality are guaranteed before gathering the data. Participants are contacted either through face-to-face interactions or via digital channels, based on their availability and personal choice. Participants are given explicit instructions regarding the objective of the study and the voluntary aspect of their involvement. The survey is conducted, and participants are provided with sufficient time to fill it out. Data collection is carried out within a designated timeframe to reduce bias and guarantee consistency in responses.

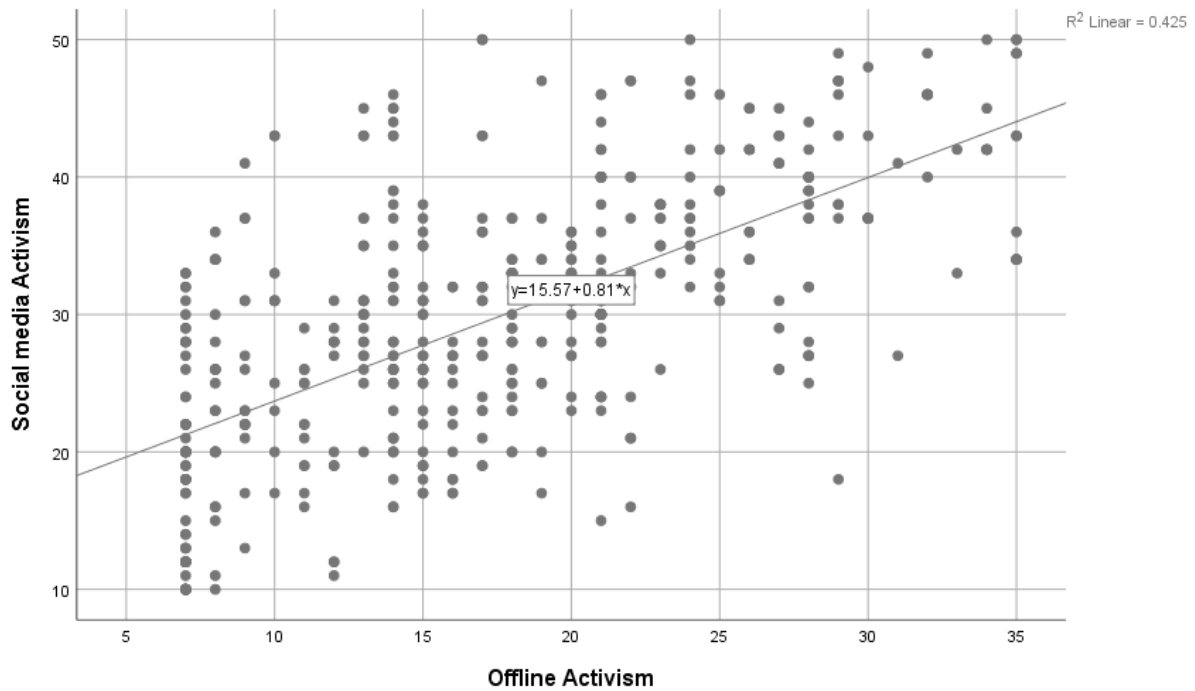
The statistical analysis of the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire survey is conducted using suitable statistical methods. In order to provide a concise summary of the sample and key variables, descriptive statistics are calculated, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency. The study utilises inferential statistics, mainly correlation analysis, to investigate the association between social media activism and offline activism among college students of Kerala. Data analysis is facilitated by the utilisation of statistical software, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which guarantees precision and effectiveness in managing extensive datasets.

Analysis and Interpretations

Correlation between Social Media Activism and Offline Activism

	N	R	P value
Social Media Activism	500	0.652**	.000
Offline Activism			

Table 1 shows the relationship between Social Media Activism and Offline Activism. The correlation coefficient (r) of 0.652 indicates a strong positive correlation between Social Media Activism and Offline Activism. The result suggests that individuals are more likely to participate in social media activism as Offline Activism increases. Hence, the study affirms a significant relationship between Social Media Activism and Offline Activism among College students in Kerala.



Graph 1

The finding suggests that the students who engage in higher levels of activism on social media platforms tend to also engage in higher levels of offline activism. Our results exhibit similarities with the trends discussed in the (Boulianne & Theocharis 2020) research, suggesting a strong relationship between online political activities like signing petitions and joining political groups with offline political activities. Zeib (2022) also has similar findings; the study asserts that online participatory behaviour predicts offline activities. Our results substantiate the claims made by (Chae et al., 2019; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Slavina & Brym, 2020), pointing to a robust positive relationship between online activism and offline activism, which asserts that online activism can stimulate offline activism activities. Our study's observations also correspond with the insights provided by (Chon & Park, 2020), validating a robust positive correlation between social media activism and offline activism in various contentious issues. Similar research conducted in the Indian context (Deori & Vansanglura, 2023) affirms that social media activism can lead to offline activism, although various other influencing factors exist. Even though our research findings on the relationship between social media activism and offline activism are

supported by a robust set of previous research conclusions, we must mention some contradicting views. Lim (2013) discusses various instances where online activism does not translate to offline activism. While agreeing with the power of social media in activism, she discusses the concept of slacktivism, which may hinder so-called real activism. Schumann & Klein (2015) argue that the internet fosters low-cost and low-risk activism, or "slacktivism," which could negatively affect real-life collective action. Also, the study found that participating in so-called slacktivism activities does make people less likely to sign a petition, attend a panel discussion, and participate in a demonstration. Lewis et al. (2014) identify an inverse relationship between online social movement mobilisation and deep participation. This also signifies the concept of slacktivism.

Overall our research supports the positive relation tradition which states that social media activism will amplify offline activism and protests. All though there are contradicting views as discussed earlier the study asserts a positive role of social media in increasing offline protests and activism. There are many possible explanations exist for the finding. Firstly, social media allows students to escalate their voices and bring attention to various socio-political issues(Choi & Cho, 2017). When these issues garner attention online, they often increase awareness and interest among individuals motivated to take their activism engagement offline. Second, Social media platforms simplify rapidly connecting with a substantial audience (Kaplan, 2021). Using these platforms, students can arrange events, protests, rallies, and other in-person activities. The ease of coordinating and mobilising via social media can lead to increased engagement rates in offline endeavours. Third, Social media assists students in forming connections with individuals who share similar interests and with activist groups, enabling the interchange of ideas, tactics, and resources(Ellison et al., 2007). These associations have the potential to result in partnerships for offline initiatives that harness the combined power of diverse collectives. Finally, Social Media Activism can influence public

perspectives and discussions, fostering a supportive atmosphere for offline activism. As conversations on social media increase public consciousness, more individuals might find themselves motivated to engage in offline activities.

Conclusion

To summarise, this study highlights the significant influence of social media on activism among the college students of Kerala. The findings of this study, which employed a quantitative survey-based approach and included a sample size of 500 participants, indicate a significant positive association between students' participation in social media activism and their involvement in real-world activism initiatives. The association mentioned above underscores the interdependence between online and offline manifestations of activism, underscoring the transformative capacity of social media platforms in influencing societal engagement. The study's results shed light on the changing activism environment in Kerala, where the growing popularity of social media platforms has had a substantial impact on the ways in which college students articulate their viewpoints. With the utilisation of digital channels by students to

advocate for their issues, a noticeable influence is evident in their offline activism endeavours. This finding highlights the significance of taking into account both virtual and physical domains when understanding the dynamics of contemporary student activism. Furthermore, this study makes a valuable contribution to the broader academic conversation surrounding the impact of social media on societal engagement, specifically within the student population. This study provides a detailed knowledge of how college students in Kerala utilise social media to bring about significant change in their areas of interest by examining the complex relationship between online and offline venues. The research findings have broader implications that transcend the specific context of Kerala. These implications offer vital insights for scholars, politicians, and activists who seek to comprehend the changing dynamics of activism in the digital era. Stakeholders can enhance their ability to plan and endorse projects that promote young participation and social change by acknowledging the mutually beneficial connection between social media activism and offline engagement. In summary, this research emphasises the significant impact that social media platforms can have on promoting real-world involvement. It emphasises the importance of adopting holistic strategies that incorporate both virtual and physical activism domains to tackle current societal challenges effectively.

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APPENDIX

Social Media Activism among the college students in Kerala Questionnaire

Demographic Variables

1. Age
2. Gender
 - a. Male b. Female c. Transperson d. I prefer not to say
3. Educational level of the respondent
 - Graduation b. Post Graduation c. MPhil/PhD

4. Geographic location

a. Urban b.Rural c.Semi-urban

5. Discipline of Study

Arts b. Commerce c. Science d. Technology

6. Type of institution

a.Government b.Private c.Aided

7. How many hours a day do you use social media?

< 1hour, 2hr, 3hr, 4hr, 5 and more than 5

8. How do you mostly access social media?

Smart Phone, Feature Phone, PC, Laptop, Tablet and other

Social Media Activism

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
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1. I would create social media posts about the issue of my interest whenever I had a chance.

2. I would join a group on social media supporting my viewpoint about this issue.

3. I would upload materials (e.g., pictures and videos) related to this issue to social media.

4. I would leave a personal comment on a social media post about this issue.

5. I would provide links to other information related to this issue.

6. I would use hashtags that make it easier for people to search and share my perspective regarding this issue.
7. I would press “Like” or “Love” for social media postings on this issue if the postings agree with my opinion (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).
8. I would follow certain people, pages, or groups that share my viewpoint about this issue on social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Youtube).
9. I would retweet or mention content about this issue if the content agrees with my viewpoint (e.g., Twitter).
10. I would share postings about this issue with my friends on social media if the content agrees with my viewpoint.

Offline Activism

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
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1. I would sign a petition supporting my view on a particular issue.
2. I would attend a rally or demonstration supporting my view regarding this issue.
3. I would attend an organisation meeting supporting my view regarding this issue.
4. I would become a member of an organization supporting my view on this issue.
5. I would actively campaign for an organization supporting my view regarding this issue.

6. I would contact a politician or government official supporting my view of this issue by phone or letter.

7. I would contact activists supporting my view of this issue by phone or letter.

This study is a part of my PhD thesis. The full questionnaire includes other variables, too.