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Impact of Social Media on Youth Empowerment

Dr. Shumpenthung Ezung¹

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Don Bosco College, Kohima, Nagaland Email ID: aushumpene@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social media is one of the most powerful phenomena of the modern digital era that affect almost every sphere of young people lives. It is a platform or channel that enables young people to express their identities, network with various people, learn and take part in civic and political discussions. In this paper, the role of social media in youth empowerment is discussed in a multi-dimensional way, weighing its advantages and disadvantages. Based on historical references and the latest trends, as well as the knowledge of academics and researchers, the present work points to the possibilities of using such platforms as the Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok to allow young users to develop critical thinking and access educational materials, promote social movements, and consider themselves innovative. Meanwhile, it discusses the potentially negative aspects of social media such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and bad mental health conditions. The research is a qualitative and descriptive research approach that uses secondary data-sources in the form of scholarly literature, empirical research, and media coverage. Thematic content analysis is also used to explore some of the most important roles of social media one of which is informing and inspiring as well as mobilizing the youth. The paper makes realistic suggestions over the basis of findings to improve digital literacy, increase inclusive and safe online domains, and to engage in youth-led projects. The article is keen to point out that though social media poses some significant dangers, it is capable of a great potential in empowerment when it is taken critically and is manipulated appropriately. Their full benefit of being digitally engaged can only be realized when a combined effort is made by educators, families, policymakers, and the youth themselves.

Keywords: social media, youth empowerment, digital literacy, online activism, mental health, civic engagement

Introduction

With the emergence of social media, the interactions between young people and how they express and interact with the outside world has changed immensely. Rideout & Robb (2018) reveal that more than 9 out of 10 American teenagers use social media frequently or daily. Now, the new digital arena where identity is being built, community is being shaped, and movements are born are the social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Although there is still the debate on whether social media has made any difference in youth empowerment or not, it is evident that these forms of media have extraordinary opportunities as well as serious risks. This paper takes a critical approach to adopting the dual-edged feature of social media by discussing its historical origin, its contribution, limitations, and effective measures in assuaging the potential of social media in empowering young people using digital mediation.

Youth empowerment can be defined as a procedure where the youthful acquire more capacity, power, and agency to decide and effect changes to their own lives and within the society. The concept of empowerment is related not only to the access of the information but also to the participation, self-confidence, skill-building, and ability to influence. These aspects are increasingly being catered through social media becoming its major channel. The social media provides a participatory and decentralised media environment as opposed to the traditional media that had a top-down flow of information, and instead of the youth being mere recipients of information, they are the creators of content and information too.

The transformation of this digital change has led to new avenues in which young people are able to participate in civic participation, sensitize people on what is of concern to them and the mobilization of resources of action. Whether it is microblogging on mental health or spearheading climate strikes or starting an online business, the current generation of young people in front of their screens is transforming both social and political spaces. In addition, the adoption of social media in the teaching and working environment has also opened up the education and development fields, particularly in underserved or remote locations.

Nonetheless, the empowerment power of the social media is not automatic. Those factors that mediate it include digital literacy, socio-economic status, online safety, and algorithmic bias. Thus, the review of the place of social media in the empowerment of the youth is topical and needed. In this paper, the complexity of this relationship is discussed in the hope that it will be of value to the teachers, policy makers, parents, and young people.

Review of Literature

In their article, Youth Digital Activism, Social Media and Human Rights Education: Fridays for Future Movement (Martinez Sainz and Hanna, 2020), the authors considered the way in which human rights could be learned about by peers during social media activism in the pandemic. Their digital ethnography points out the teaching value of the social platforms.

In their article, Fernandez-Zubieta et al. (2023) identified that online youth activism is also a fusion of emotional, informative, and motivational content and can be a form of digital collective action.

In the article Collective Identity Formation on Instagram, Investigating Fridays, Brnker and his colleagues (2019) concentrated on the identity building role among youth which is played by Instagram. They discovered that the comments in comment sections aroused emotional expressions, which played an important role in group solidarity and group identity.

In their work, Perceived Impacts of the Fridays for Future Movement on Individual Behaviour (Wamsler et al., 2023), the researchers discovered that online youth activism had a long-term behavioural impact on the environment: the more one participated in the activities of the movement, the more concerned with the ecology an individual was and the more likely to take environmental action.

In Black Panther, Cultural Identity and Youth Empowerment Clark (2020) considered the role of the film Black Panther which provoked racial pride and empowerment of the black and Asian American youth, a manifestation of the power of the mass media on minority identities.

Research Gap

Whereas most research on the role of social media in identity, activism and behaviour change is performed in addition to the Western youth or international movements, a few of them question the role of social media, in particular about identity, in particular in countries such as Israel and Muslim countries. Few studies have examined the localized, cultural or long-term empowerment in non-Western social context, in particular South Asian. What is more, there is little comparative media design and barely any qualitative details on how people personally change.

Research Methodology

The type of research used in this work is qualitative and descriptive as the basis is on the use of secondary data through scholarly articles, reports and media channels. This paper took the theme-based approach of literature review to investigate ways in which social media is empowering the youths by formation of identity, activist participation, development of skills and mental health. The sources were collected in scholarly journals, institutional publications, and international databases. The content analysis was used to determine major themes and patterns through historical context and empirical studies. This approach allowed the conception of the effects of social media on the young population and its effects both positive and negative through the creation of an evidence-based vision without having had to buy back into the true field.

Historical Context of Media and Youth Empowerment

The role of media in the empowerment of the young people is not new. Through the ages, the media has been a tool to educate, inform, and mobilize young people generation after generation. With the technical advancement of communications, namely, the shift in the media-conveyed content of print to radio to digital, the role of media in creating youth identities, goals, and mobilization has changed as well.

❖ Early 20th Century:

The print media were used in the early 20th century as a basis of reaching the youth. Youth Companion and The Boy's Own Paper became publications where people were entertained as well as being educated. They provided a window into the world of literature, science, morality stories, and a broader world view, and did so in such a way that it helped create early models of intellectual and civic activity among the young readers. These stores made it possible to dream that youth can be productive members of the society, often enforcing patriotic responsibility and self-culture.

❖ Mid-20th Century:

Media that was youth-led and youth-focused sprang up in the middle of the 20th century as a form of resistance and youthful expression. Such media types as pamphlets, newsletters, and underground radio played an important part in the mobilization of youth during the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-colonial struggles going around the world. The newspaper of the Black Panther Party, as an example, helped empower the voices of the young people, especially those that belonged to the misrepresented groups, to express their frustrations and demand the change of the system. The role of media lost its mere informative character; it transformed into the process of empowerment through participation.

❖ Late 20th Century:

As television and music culture expanded, the 1980s and 1990s became the period during which the media began to be used as an agent of creative and cultural empowerment. Shows such as Yo! MTV Raps, magazines such as The Source, and film and television aimed at the youth presented their part of the city realities, ambitions and opposition. Mass media became a tool of mass critique against authority and identity politics by hip hop, punk and other

punkish subcultures of youth. Now youths found media as not only a means of expressing themselves but also gave them a means of redefining their culture

❖ 21st Century:

The era of digital age resulted in a radical democratization of media. With the upsurge of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, it has been possible to communicate with anyone real time around the world and also to create and share any type of content. The younger generation also have the capability of generating viral campaigns, crowd funding projects and counter-acting mainstream discourse. The protests of the Arab Spring, the #MeToo movement, Fridays for Future, and many other movements involving mostly young people show how digital media can be used to promote political action and social change on a multinational level.

In general, the media developments show a certain line of progression: the flow of information to a power, consumption to production. This historical continuum explains why media and social media can be really powerful tools of empowering youth in the 21st century.

Positive Impacts of Social Media on Youth Empowerment

1. Platform for Expression and Identity

Through this social media, young people are allowed to express themselves and give their accounts, and identify themselves. It gives the marginalized a voice and this helps to increase individual self-confidence by telling and sharing stories, creative content and peer feedback.

2. Access to Information and Skill Development

Youth gain the undreamt levels of access to knowledge, tutelage and career improvement through the internet. Through platforms such as YouTube and LinkedIn, individuals find tutorials, job-related tips, and industry knowledge that allow and encourage self-learning and making decisions based on facts.

3. Community Building and Belonging

Through online groups that share common values and interests, a person finds a sense of home and belonging. A cross cultural, linguistic, geographical bridge is established among the youth to work together, exchange information and create a possibility of change.

4. Catalyst for Youth-Led Movements

The use of social media to create movements that are used to mobilize masses have been evidenced through movements like #MeToo, #FridayForFuture and #BlackLivesMatter. These campaigns have been led by the youth who have demanded justice, equity, and systemic changes.

5. Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Applications such as Instagram and TikTok help young people to capitalize on their skills, create companies, and market social enterprises, and this is evidence to demonstrate that the internet generation is entrepreneurial.

Negative Impacts of Social Media on Youth Empowerment

1. Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Digital platforms with anonymity can foster other negative habits, such as bullying and trolling. Anxiety, depression and withdrawal of shallow belief of victims has been common in case of victims feels insecure.

2. Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Customized algorithms, which selectively present content preferences, can have the effect of drawing young people away from seeing alternative points of view and lead to an entrenchment of bias with less potential to view alternative points of view critically (Pariser, 2011).

3. Unrealistic Standards and Negative Body Image

Viewing unrealistic and carefully designed ideals of beauty on social media and especially among adolescent girls leads to body dissatisfaction. It may cause body image disorders, lack of self-worth and identity problems.

4. Distraction and Reduced Productivity

The feature of addictiveness of platforms derails the use of screen time leading to loss of focus on academic, personal, or societal tasks of the youths, and performance at school.

5. Misinformation and Ideological Manipulation

Proliferation of falsehood and propaganda on the social media has altered the decision-making of young people as well as their political opinions not to mention their approach to community health choices.

Functions of Media in Youth Empowerment

The media, both in traditional and digital forms, is a very significant element in the formation of experience, vision, and abilities of the young. It does not just serve as a conveyor of information, but as a form of change agent that can inform, inspire, mobilize and educate. With the changing landscape of communication technologies, youth are also developing new ways of using media as an expression of empowerment.

❖ Informing and Educating:

Along with this is one of the primary purposes of media, which is to give the young people access to information. This goes beyond the recent events to cover things about health, rights, civic duties, environment and other cultures of the world. Learning media, which includes documentaries, podcasts, online articles, webinars, and videos on YouTube, have expanded when and where one can learn beyond a formal teaching or learning facility. Media thus uses the uncontrollable, and yet strong, unofficial arm of the education system especially in young people in inaccessible areas or underserved.

Furthermore, the efforts to establish media literacy campaigns and youth-oriented platforms promote the thinking skills among youth. Understanding the value of determining the believability of sources, recognizing instances of misinformation, and how the media portrays information is becoming an essential element of empowerment of the youths in the digital world.

❖ Inspiring and Motivating:

Media also is playing an equally significant role in engaging and empowering the youths through showing cases of resilience, inventiveness, participation, and leadership. As young people witness their fellow young people being able to make change, start successful programs, or even rise above some terrible situation, it creates a belief in the possibility, as well as a sense of purpose. Social media such as Instagram and YouTube, e.g., have allowed youthful entrepreneurs, activists, and creators to become relatable role models to many people as they show them their experiences on the networking sites.

The symbolic aspect of these stories is also to transform the expectations of the society. Disadvantaged youth, whose voices are usually marginalized in popular discourse, are now going ahead and narrating their own narratives and insisting on their existence in the usage of language. This creates a sense of inclusiveness and reinforces a sense of identity as a group of youths thus creating empowered communities instead of lonely individuals.

❖ Amplifying Voices and Mobilizing Change:

Media also performs the role of mobilizing as it helps young people to unite around some common causes. Hashtags, petitions, viral campaigns, are all possible to generate local issues into global dialogues. With media, the youth have the capacity to organize protests, raise funds, form coalitions and also to influence opinion and policy. This means that young people are putting their money where their mouth is by becoming fully mobilized in harnessing their potential in civil society, which makes them a key aspect of contemporary youth empowerment.

Media is like a mirror and megaphone in itself where it not only plays the role of a mirror to reflect the content of the youths but acting as a megaphone to voice out their concerns. When practiced with conscience and inclusion, it becomes one of the strongest tools of creating social and personal change to this generation.

Empirical Outcomes of Social Media on Youth Empowerment

Social media has significantly grown in its development at a tremendous rate with its impact on young people being far reaching and quantifiable. Empirical research has revealed that social media, particularly Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter, play a significant role in defining the way youths view the society as well as the society; and how they are able to effect change. All these have observable results in various aspects including identity and expression, civic involvement, and online entrepreneurship.

Among the empirical findings, a marked rise in youth awareness and civic engagement can be attributed to one of the most notable. Social media has enabled the youth to be updated with all issues that concern the rest of the world including global warming, respect to human rights and gender equality. The movements such as FridaysForFuture and MeToo have shown that the digital environment can be used to enable mobilisation of young people on a huge scale. As an example, the popularization of young activists such as Greta Thunberg can be characterized by the internationalization of the voice, since it would not be possible without digital magnification, demonstrating how social media can transform local voices into global leaders. Language Studies research shows that the young generations engaged in such movements tend to have a better chance of having to develop critical thinking; political awareness, and strong sense of social responsibility.

Social media also plays an essential role in self-expression and construction of identity. Empirical studies also show that the platforms are a safe place where young people, especially the ones with minority identities, can experiment and show different parts of their identity that might not be accepted in a real-life context. The online communities that LGBTQ+ youth tend to discover have been largely reported to make them feel seen, validated, and motivated to stand up about their rights. This belongingness leads to an improved self-esteem and a stronger personal agency.

In addition, there is a wide scope of acquisition of skills and entrepreneurship via social media. Young people are continuously finding it more appropriate to learn to use digital tools through platforms such as YouTube, develop creative expertise, and create personal brands. Whether it is freelance designers and influencers or start-up founders, young people are utilizing online space in order to generate income, sell themselves and find diverse global markets. This type of economic empowerment has not only increased the financial independence, but it has also led to leadership and innovation.

But, not everything good comes out of it. The negative outcomes of overuse of social media such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and addiction are also recorded in many studies. The pressure of always portraying a curated life, liking or being liked, and following the trends that may be going viral can have devastating mental health effects. Further, issues related to misinformation, cyberbullying and online surveillance are major challenges that threaten the empowerment story.

Nevertheless, based on empirical evidence, there is a strong indication that under a responsible approach to social media, it can be used as a transformational process to the empowerment of the youth. It offers education facilities, activist platforms and economic and social platforms. With the increased use of digital tools by the youths in their daily activities, crucial media literacy and ethical participation are vital in a way to ensure that the consequences of using social media will not be empowering but rather exploitative.

Recommendations

The effects of social media on youth empowerment can be described as intricate and manifold. These sites open up unparalleled possibilities of expression, learning and activism yet they bring dangers concerning its effect on our mind, misinformation and cyber abuse. A multi-stakeholder solution that includes educators and parents, policy makers, platform developers, and the youth themselves will be needed to maximize the empowering capacities of social media, with the mineralization of the negative impacts of the latter. To create a digital etal which encourages the power of young people, inclusion, and well-being the following suggestions are going to be delivered.

❖ Promote Digital and Media Literacy:

Digital and Media literacy can be one of the most useful ways to empower the youth. These are being able to question online information, learn to differentiate between proper sources and fake news, learn about the online trail they leave, and learn to manipulate the effects of algorithms. Both schools and community organizations need to incorporate media literacy into the curriculum, both elementary and in programs that should be targeted at various age groups. By turning into critical consumers of media and responsible producers of content, young people would have a much more likely chance of turning social media into an instrument of their personal and community good.

❖ Encourage Positive Self-Image and Mental Health Awareness:

With the impact that social media has on self-perceptions and identity formation, the culture of authenticity and self-acceptance needs to be fostered on social media. Body positivity, inclusivity and real-life representation campaigns must be given a platform through which they spread. In addition, the education on mental health needs to be integrated into the digitally driven processes of interaction with each other, with a call to free discussion, mutual support, and professional assistance when necessary. There is the possibility of developing a culture that normalizes mental health topics online through the collective efforts of influencers, teachers, and schools.

❖ Foster Positive Social Connections and Online Communities:

Promoting the development of strong and varied online communities among the youth can help reverse the effects of social comparison and cyberbullying that can isolate the youth from others. Such programs as digital mentoring, peer-to-peer learning, and intergenerational dialogue can help make the necessary space where young people feel heard and appreciated. Empowerment revolves around interpersonal skills and resiliency that is attained due to the presence of online communities that are safe.

❖ Empower Youth to Lead Change:

Social media can be regarded not only as the means of communication but also as the means of mobilizing and leading. They should fund youth-led digital campaigns, train and pay the youth, and give them platforms to lead social agendas, by the institutions, NGOs, and governments. Some examples of programs that promote the use of digital tools to achieve social good by the youth are hackathons, online advocacy labs, and challenges in innovation.

❖ Encourage Safe, Responsible, and Inclusive Use of Social Media:

The social media companies and policymakers need to focus more on making the medium a safe place by erecting content moderation mechanisms, anti-bullying guidelines, data privacy safeguards, and open algorithmic policies. Schools and families are also required to train younger users on how to behave ethically online, online consent, and the consequences of bad actions. The needs of at-risk populations, including LGBTQ+ youth, youth in rural areas, and persons living with disabilities, must be considered, and online space must be inclusive, accessible, and affirming.

Social media can be an empowering force to youths, but it must be actively designed, taught, and done. These are only a few of the available recommendations that, when adopted on the systematic basis, can make social media the tool that brings equity, creativity, leadership, and meaningful youth engagement into the 21st century.

Conclusion

Social media has since become one of the most instrumental factors that define the attitudes, behaviours and opportunities of the youth today. It provides its users with a large-scale online environment by which youths can express themselves, acquire knowledge, organize community, and campaign about

social change. As has been demonstrated throughout the study, social media can be used to empower the youth, by empowering them through the critical engagement, skill building, innovation, and leadership.

The evidence of this transformative potential of social media, however, comes with severe dangers, which include cyberbullying, misinformation, mental health problems, ideological bubble-like environments. What can be seen here is the special significance of the guided, inclusive, and critically informed approach to digital participation.

In order to effectively use social media as a method of empowering the youth, efforts must be made by stakeholders to collaborate. It is important to start promoting digital literacy, help to create safer online environments, instill self-awareness, and assist youth-led initiatives.

Basically, social media cannot just be regarded as a medium of communicating with each other; it is an interactive environment which can either enhance or ruin the future generation. The way it is going to affect people will be determined by how consciously and constructively it is applied. By adopting social media within its fundraising system, Oxfam can help generate a sustainable interest in social media that will empower young people, help them become resilient, and lead action-oriented societal members.

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