



## **Youth Engagement on the Digital Democratic Space: A case of Nagaland**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study examines how youth leverage social media for non-electoral political participation, addressing the gap between digital engagement and sustained political action. Drawing on theoretical frameworks on cyberspace democracy theory and digital activism, I analyse the 2025 Nagaland protest on 147 faculty recruitment as a case study. The study contributes to digital democracy literature by demonstrating how 'digitally-enabled' activism creates new pathways for collective action for marginalised groups, such as the youth, to strategies social media campaigns to effect policy change. Further, the persistent challenges of youth political engagement are being discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Youth, Social Media, Political Participation, Collective Action, Digital Activism, Nagaland.*

### **I. Introduction**

The digital revolution has radically transformed how young people engage with politics, creating what Kellner (2013) terms an expanded “cyberspace democracy” that offers new opportunities for political participation, particularly for marginalised groups. In India, where 444 million youth constitute ninety per cent of the country’s 491 million social media users (Kemp,2025), this transformation has profound implications for democratic engagement and collective action. Research on the use of social media has been predominantly on electoral politics (Wang,2007; Lal,2017); consequently, there are significant gaps that remain in understanding how youth leverage digital platforms for non-electoral political participation and the conditions under which online engagement translates into sustained offline political action.

The study addresses these gaps by examining youth political agency through social media usage in non-electoral contexts, to build legitimacy, mobilise collective action to challenge institutional obstruction in peripheral regions like Nagaland.

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The paper is structured in three parts: (1) A review of the literature on youth political participation vis-à-vis social media usage. (2) An examination of the Nagaland 147 faculty protest in 2025 as an outlier incident. (3) A discussion of the rationale of the youth-specific study.

## **II. Methodology and Scope**

The study relies on data from secondary literature, interviews and participant observation, and defines youth/young people as individuals aged between 18 and above, extending the upper limit to align with the prevailing notion of senior youth within Naga society. The analysis draws broadly on social media usage for political ends without restricting to a single platform.

## **III. Theoretical Framework**

This paper is grounded in Kellner's (2013) theoretical concept of 'cyberspace democracy', which posits that communication technology fundamentally redefines the public sphere, creating an expanded, empowered, and diverse democratic space, particularly for the underrepresented groups. This framework is reinforced by Earl and Kimport's (2011) distinction between "digitally supported" political actions and "digitally-enabled" novel forms of participation, while incorporating Tufekci's (2017) "digital repertoires of contention", providing a more nuanced understanding of how social media transforms the substance of political participation.

The relationship between digital technologies and democratic participation has generated extensive scholarly debate, with perspectives ranging from techno-optimistic visions of enhanced democracy to skeptical assessments of digital nuance. This section synthesises key theoretical arguments relevant to understanding youth political engagement.

### **Digital Optimism: Expanding Democratic Space**

The use of digital media by citizens to engage in politics has potentially expanded the democratic space (Kellner, 2013), displayed unconventional participatory acts and reinvented political activism (Norris, 2002). Norris (2002) believes that the integration of internet-based technology into participatory strategies demonstrates the dramatic potential of digital democracy. The paradigm shift is through the incorporation of media capabilities, enabling the dissemination of information, fusion of ideas, and mobilisation tactics quickly and efficiently. Leveraging civic technology, according to Gilman and Peixoto (2019), creates democratic innovation by providing new and multiple entryways for citizens to engage.



Of the new forms of engagement, internet activism has emerged as one of the latest and trending alternative arteries of political participation, facilitating widespread political change (Newton & Deth, 2016; Norris, 2002). Here, social media stands out as a global phenomenon in terms of technological affordances; indispensable for civic and political participation; critical in understanding modern democratic engagement (Theocharis et al., 2022). Lal (2017) believes that the intensive and extensive use of social media has reached a preponderance milestone and is no longer an online phenomenon that can potentially gain traction and take physical manifestations in the form of protest, demonstrations, or even influence legislation. Kaskazi and Kitzie (2023) are of the view that a digital-political shift is underway, pointing out the way people engage with democracy by leveraging digital technology. Such a digital interface to Gilman and Peixoto (2019), will result in changing the traditional relationship between the citizens and the state.

Several empirical findings have recognised the political application of social media within the 'canonical' categories of political behaviour (Theocharis et al., 2022) that 'complements traditional forms of participation' (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018; Ohme et al., 2018; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Conroy et al., 2012). Tiidenberg et al. (2024), in conjunction, believe that internet-based discourses, such as disseminating content on social media, are essential for political participation. The optics believe that ease of access to a variety of information, a convenient and real-time, spontaneous engagement facilitated by social media, positively contributes to the sophistication of knowledge and skills that ultimately illuminate political participation. Further, it opens up the space for the marginalised sections to participate (Tiidenberg et al., 2024; Keating & Mealis, 2017; Gilman & Peixoto, 2019; Wang, 2007; Papacharissi, 2004). These scholars have euphorized the potential of a robust digital democracy.

### **Digital Skepticism: Passivity, Control and Uncivility**

In contrast, the sceptics contend that the political application of social media does not meaningfully enrich participation, while others question online participation as it does not positively translate into real-time civic actions rather promotes passive publics (Theocharis et al., 2022; Carr et al., 2020; Lokniti, 2019; Kruse et al., 2017). A survey by Lokniti (2019) found that social media users seldom articulate their political views or share political news on these platforms, making them 'passive recipients' of political content. Ruddock (2013) cautions that social media, a corporate by-product, is being used as a tool of foreign policy, fostering dissent in various places and events around the world. Coming down heavily on the technological mediation, Theocharis et al. (2022) raised concerns about social media platforms' architectural algorithms and filtering mechanisms on participation. Additionally, the propensity of information dissemination can be systematically controlled by internet speed and censorship.



The startling rate of social media consumption in an unmediated, unquestioned way has become a subject of precarious concern for those in parental, mentoring, and teaching roles associated with young people, as it impactfully shapes their temperament about themselves and others (Ligocki, 2019). On the other hand, engagement on social media is also shaped by uncivil experiences like hug box, clickbait, slacktivism, slander, polarised interactions, surveillance, harassment, interpersonal conflict, and comment wars, as such their activity gets disincentivised (Tiidenberg et al., 2024). Therefore, a lack of civility on social media could hinder engagement (Kruse et al., 2017). Turning it around, Papacharissi (2004) attests that adherence to civility in the social domain limits free conversation, making it reserved and less spontaneous. Luhtakallio & Meriluoto (2023) critique that uncivil and unpublic elements cannot be removed from online democratic space, as discourses are driven by appearance, visibility and recognition, making it a fame-based public sphere. Despite the inherent vulgarities of unfairness, threats, and shortcomings, these junctures offer new solidarities towards broader democratic perspectives against hegemonic foundations in contemporary times.

#### **IV. Case study**

Across the globe, numerous youth-led movements have surged through strategized social media campaigns. Some of the notable movements are #BlackLivesMatter 2020, Singaporean General Election 2020, Global Climate Strike 2019, Fridays for Future 2018, #MarchForOurLives 2018, #EndSARS 2017, Youth for Change 2017, #MeToo Movement 2016, Umbrella Revolution 2014, Nirbhaya Protest 2012, Obama Campaign 2012, India Against Corruption 2011, Arab Spring of 2008 & 2011, Seattle meeting 1999 and others. The representative movements, ranging from racial discrimination, creating awareness, ecology, gun controls, civil rights, sexual harassment, electoral support, corruption, or political reforms, have dwelled primarily on a strategic social media campaign as the central mode of mobilisation for action. These movements incorporated social media and other associated digital platforms, creating awareness, mobilisation and logistics, garnering solidarity across regional, national and international borders. Internet-based technology, vis-à-vis social media, has afforded the capability to effect desired actions in a larger and synchronised fashion, which in the hitherto case would not have been.

The 147 protests in Nagaland 2025 provides an ideal case study for examining the dynamics cited theoretically and practically. The movement, led by the Combined Technical Association of Nagaland (CTAN) and Nagaland NET/PhD Qualified Forum (NNQF), represents a paradigmatic example of how non-mainstream youth organisations can leverage social media to challenge institutional power structures and achieve policy outcomes. The protest emerged in response to the allegedly illegal recruitment of 147



Assistant Professors and Librarians in Nagaland's Higher Education Department, with youth activists demanding revocation of the appointments and implementation of transparent recruitment procedures.

The case is theoretically significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the potential of communication technology to expand the democratic space by enabling new forms of political organisations for marginalised groups, such as the CTAN and NNQF, for concerted action. Secondly, the movement provided a substantive case of political efficacy in reference to the revocation of the appointment order by the government. Thirdly, social media took the centre stage in information dissemination, communication, expression, mobilisation, and logistics, resulting in a networked and collective direct action, blending digitally-supported and digitally-enabled participatory forms of contention. The modus operandi of the infamous 147 protest launched by the CTAN-NNQF was a synergy of digital activism and direct action. Participatory devices, which are digitally supported and digitally enabled, such as calls for direct action, memes, satires, sarcasms, reels, videos and music were circulated online. These resources enveloped the expressive element of the movement. Real-time media coverage screened through social media channels of media houses and individuals also incentivised wider support. The online discussions generated contesting conversations that put the movement discourses in the limelight.

Practically, as the protest occurred in a peripheral region with limited media coverage, it offers insights into digital activism in India's Northeast region, an area that has received limited academic and policy attention despite its distinct political dynamics and strong youth demographic. With over 65% of Nagaland's population under 35 years of age and increasing internet penetration, the state represents a microcosm of broader youth political engagement trends in India.

## **V. Rationale for the Youth-specific study**

The extensive interaction of young people with digital tools has established them as a distinct cohort, often termed as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) or 'internet generation' by Norris (2002), 'online community' by Papacharissi (2004) and others, such as 'expressive citizens' for Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2025). This generation spends significantly more time online, often surpassing their physical social engagement (Ligocki, 2019), making social media a constant aspect of their lives and a crucial factor in their political participation.

Youth political engagement is often complex and unpredictable (Staeheli, 2019), frequently manifesting online through non-conventional acts like "liking" or "sharing" content. They are motivated by personal experience and peer empathy, using social media to seek solidarity, extract resonant narratives, and assert



their political identity (Tiidenberg et al. 2024). Furthermore, digital platforms, particularly through anonymity, enable more open exchange of ideas by overcoming real-life identity barriers (Papacharissi,2004).

The significance of social media is in its capacity to nurture and micro-manage youth political agency (Ruddock,2013). Yet, this engagement remains a puzzle: while it provides new outlets for political expression (Keating & Mealis,2017), understanding the rationale, manner and purpose of youth's extensive digital involvement is therefore a vital subject for subcultural democratic studies (Ruddock,2013).

## **VI. Conclusion**

This study concludes that youth media usage, as demonstrated by the Nagaland 147 protest, is a powerful agent for non-electoral, collective political action that successfully challenges the 'passive publics. It is a contested terrain, traditional political participatory acts may continue, yet the battle on cyberspace can no longer be subject to utopian considerations; the use of emergent technology has produced new social relations, forms of political logic and behaviours whereby non-mainstream groups can bypass institutional gatekeepers to build legitimacy. The challenge is to prepare the young people with the skills to navigate the ever-changing synergy of technology and human history (Kahn & Kellner,2004).



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