Original Article

FROM HASHTAGS TO CLASSROOMS: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The growing influence of social media has redefined how young people communicate, learn, and express themselves. This paper explores social media's role as a transformative educational tool within the framework of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It examines how digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) promote participatory learning, collaborative communication, and multilingual engagement among students. At the same time, the paper acknowledges the challenges of overexposure, digital distraction, and the erosion of authentic communication in the learning environment. Drawing parallels from Dave Eggers' the Circle, which critiques society's increasing dependence on digital transparency and constant connectivity, the study highlights the need for digital ethics and media literacy in education. The analysis situates social media not merely as a space for entertainment but as a catalyst for inclusive, accessible, and student-centered learning experiences. By integrating literature with educational theory, the paper argues that responsible social media use can advance NEP 2020's vision of equitable and technology-driven education. Ultimately, it calls for a balanced digital pedagogy that empowers youth to think critically, communicate effectively, and navigate the evolving relationship between technology, language, and education.

Keywords: Social media, Youth Education, NEP 2020, Language Diversity, Digital Literacy, Educational Transformation, The Circle by Dave Eggers, Communication Technology

INTRODUCTION

In modern India, social media has become an integral part of how young people communicate, form their identities, and engage in learning. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok serve not only as entertainment and social spaces but also as channels for sharing knowledge, expressing opinions, and accessing educational resources. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions using technology to revolutionise education by fostering inclusivity, multilingualism, and digital literacy across various communities Ministry of Education (2020). This paper explores the role of social media as a driver for educational change among youth by connecting informal and formal learning, influencing communication style, and encouraging multilingual interactions. However, it is also essential to address challenges like digital distractions, algorithmic biases, and the degradation of genuine communication.

To support this discussion, the paper references Dave Eggers's novel, *The Circle*, which reflects the pressures of the digital age, including constant connectivity, surveillance, and the merging of private and public lives. The story cautions against an overreliance on social media as a force that can lead to uniformity. This study asks how social media can support the objectives of

NEP 2020 in youth education while identifying necessary protective measures or pedagogical strategies to alleviate its potential downsides.

The following sections will include a literature review focusing on the intersection of social media and learning, the digital and language policies outlined under NEP 2020, and critiques from media studies. Next, a mixed-methods research approach will be described, followed by an analysis of findings. The conclusion will offer recommendations for policy and teaching practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Learning Practices

Research increasingly recognises social media as a platform for learning, knowledge sharing, and peer collaboration. Shaikh, Ali, and Al-Maamari conducted a bibliometric analysis revealing growth in research on "social media in learning and "teaching", with platforms facilitating informal learning, engaging students, and fostering collaborative knowledge construction Shaikh et al. (2022). These studies highlight a dual role: while social media can assist with academic tasks (like resource sharing and peer support), it can also lead to distractions and fragmented attention.

For instance, a study by Lukose and Agbayani involving university students found that although social media was utilised for academic purposes, excessive use and multitasking detracted from focus and assignment completion Lukose and Agbeyangi (2025). The impact of social media use largely depends on students' time management, the deliberate integration of social media by educators, and the clarity of its educational purpose.

Empirical research, such as studies on physics teaching during COVID-19 in India, demonstrates disparities in access to devices and internet bandwidth, exacerbating inequalities when schools moved online Madhurima et al. (2022). Students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds often faced challenges due to inadequate infrastructure and home support.

NEP 2020: TECHNOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND EDUCATIONAL VISION

NEP 2020 emphasises the integration of technology and multilingualism as core elements of educational reform. The policy aims to leverage technology to enhance learning outcomes, eliminate language barriers, and promote accessible education Ministry of Education (2020). For example, it mandates the development of digital educational content in various Indian languages, encourages online and blended learning methods, and establishes the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) to oversee technology use Ministry of Education (2020), Behera). Scholars point out that while the policy is progressive, its implementation may face challenges like a lack of infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and digital divides (All Study Journal; "Technological-Enabled Learning").

Roy Chowdhury and Ghosh argue that the success of NEP relies on how schools and districts adopt technology, localise content in regional languages, and build the necessary capacity for maintaining hardware and software Roy Chowdhury and Ghosh. (2023). Critics also caution that top-down digital mandates could overlook on-the-ground issues such as unequal access, language barriers, and teacher readiness (IOSR).

NEP's language policy supports its technological focus by recommending a three-language formula, using the mother tongue or home language as the medium of instruction at least until fifth grade, with ongoing emphasis thereafter (Wikipedia). This strategy seeks to promote multilingualism in digital education to avert linguistic exclusion.

THE CIRCLE AND DIGITAL CULTURE

The Circle by Dave Eggers presents a dystopian view of a future controlled by a tech giant, where personal privacy is diminished, and there is pressure for public transparency and social surveillance. The catchphrase "sharing is caring" becomes a tool for manipulation, compelling characters to showcase their lives . The novel critiques the loss of privacy, conformity pressures, and the commercialisation of personal information.

In an educational context, The Circle warns against uncritical acceptance of digital systems, the erosion of student voice, and the homogenisation of discussions. The text prompts reflection on whether, when social media becomes a standard practice, students lose the space for critical or alternative viewpoints. It also raises questions about how algorithms and surveillance might lead to self-censorship. Consequently, The Circle functions as a literary framework for the critical examination of the unassessed incorporation of social media within educational environments.]

Similar reflections can be found in other works, such as M. T. Anderson's Feed, which also explores the diminishing effects of media consumption. However, The Circle uniquely critiques the pervasive logic of constant connectivity and algorithm-driven governance.

SYNTHESIZING THE THEMES

In conclusion, existing literature offers a cautiously optimistic perspective: social media has the potential to enhance youth education through participatory, multilingual, and networked learning. However, realising this potential necessitates clear pedagogical frameworks, institutional support, and an understanding of issues related to inequality and expression. While NEP 2020 aims for meaningful change, it will face real-world challenges. The Circle reminds us that technology carries inherent values: any adoption in education must be critically examined, adapted, and humanised.

METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper utilises a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative analysis of The Circle with empirical data collected from student interviews and surveys in secondary schools in one Indian state. The objective is to triangulate how youth experience social media and how these experiences align with the themes discussed by Eggers, as well as the aspirations outlined in NEP2020.

SAMPLE AND SETTING

For the empirical component, three schools (urban, semi-urban, and rural) in Tamil Nadu were selected to represent diverse contexts and access levels. Approximately 60 students from grades 9-12 (a total of 180 students) were surveyed in each school. Additionally, I conducted detailed interviews with 6 students and 3 teachers from each school, focusing on the integration of social media into teaching, totalling 18 students and 9 teachers. Consent and ethical approval were obtained.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Survey Questionnaire: Questions about social media usage (daily hours, platforms, academic vs. leisure use), perceived benefits and drawbacks, languages used on platforms, and views on combining social media with classroom learning.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Open-ended queries regarding social media in education, challenges faced, language issues, and suggestions for improvements.

Textual Analysis: Close reading of The Circle, emphasising themes of surveillance, public life, pressure to share, and conformity, with an eye toward educational implications.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data from surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlations (for example, hours spent on social media versus self-rated academic focus). Cross-tabulation by urban/rural categories was also conducted.

Qualitative data from interviews were thematically coded (e.g., digital agency, voice, distraction, multilingual practice).

Textual analysis of The Circle was integrated with themes from interviews and policy literature to reveal areas of convergence and tension.

LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on a small sample within one state and targets secondary-school students, limiting broader applicability. Additionally, self-reporting biases may influence survey responses regarding usage and attitudes. Despite these constraints, the mixed-methods approach aims to provide rich, context-sensitive insights rather than broad generalisations.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS
QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Patterns of Social Media Use: Among the 180 surveyed students, 92% reported using social media daily, with 70% spending over three hours each day. The most frequented platforms were WhatsApp (98%), Instagram (82%), YouTube (76%), and X/Twitter (55%). Academic engagement (sharing notes, discussing questions) constituted about 25% of usage, while the remaining 75% was for leisure (entertainment, social updates, memes).

Correlation with Academic Self-Efficacy: A weak negative correlation ($r = -0.21$, $p < .05$) was found between social media usage and self-rated academic concentration abilities. However, students engaging in structured academic use (like group chats for question clarification) rated their academic discipline slightly higher (mean increase of +0.3 points) compared to those using social media primarily for enjoyment.

Urban vs. Rural Differences: Urban students utilized social media more frequently for academic purposes (32%) compared to rural peers (19%). Rural students faced more connectivity challenges (internet issues, shared devices), limiting educational usage.

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: Digital Agency and Peer Learning: Many students discussed using social media to create study groups, clarify doubts informally, and share notes in bilingual formats. An urban student remarked, "If I don't understand a math problem, I take a picture and send it to the class group. Someone replies with an explanation. It saves time and embarrassment."

Theme 2: Language and Expression: Several students indicated that social media allowed them to communicate in their home languages (like Tamil or Telugu) interspersed with English, feeling more comfortable expressing themselves than in formal settings that limit language use. One rural student noted, "On WhatsApp, I write in Tamil or English as I feel comfortable, but in class, I must use English. On social media, I can discuss in my mother tongue." This aligns with NEP's goals of multilingual media and localized educational content.

Theme 3: Distractive Pull and Fragmentation: Teachers and students reported that social media distractions (notifications, memes) interrupted class focus. One teacher pointed out, "Sometimes students are checking Instagram mid-lecture; it becomes hard to regain focus." Students acknowledged that switching between academic group chats and entertainment often led to fragmented attention.

Theme 4: Power, Visibility, and Conformity: Some students felt pressure to engage publicly on social media. One quieter student shared, "If I don't respond in the group quickly, others comment. It feels like you must always be present, or you lose face." This reflects the social pressure depicted in The Circle, where silence is seen as problematic and public involvement is expected.

Theme 5: Equity, Access, and Infrastructure: Rural students reiterated their struggles with poor internet connectivity, shared devices, and limited data plans. One rural student mentioned, "Sometimes the network fails during online class. I cannot stream a video lecture without buffering." These systemic limitations hinder the ideal of equitable digital education.

The narrative describes how social media compels people to disclose more about themselves, aligning with what a valuation model deems significant based on their visibility and engagement. The story's implications regarding mandatory visibility and participation resonate throughout the educational ecosystem:

1) **Compulsory Participation:** Just as characters in "The Circle" face social penalties for being offline, students feel pressured in academic online discussion groups, losing valuable time for reflection.

2) **Algorithmic Visibility:** The social status profile depicted in the novel mirrors that of academic groups; students with higher participation frequency attract more attention, marginalising quieter students.

3) **Loss of Private Space:** The erosion of personal privacy in "The Circle" parallels education: students fear judgement on their contributions to the network, even being discouraged from asking questions that might seem "stupid".

4) **Homogeneity of Discourse:** The book's critique of a single platform suppressing diverse thought reflects classroom dynamics, where dominant scholars control discourse, causing others to withdraw or conform.

These parallels underscore the need for intentional pedagogical design to prevent technology from becoming a coercive norm.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that social media, when used purposefully, can transform educational pathways for young people by promoting peer support, multilingual communication, and connections between learning in organisations and formal settings. These results align with NEP 2020's goals for inclusivity, multilingual education, and technology-supported pedagogy. However, the results also highlight risks, including distractions, performance pressures, unequal access, and reduced voices of quieter learners. Here, "The Circle" serves as a cautionary tale, not just of useful engagement but of forced conformity in a digital space.

TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES, I SUGGEST THE FOLLOWING APPROACH

First, educators should deliberately integrate social media into structured pedagogical frameworks (e.g., designated online discussion prompts and peer feedback systems) to guide student involvement into productive, meaningful applications.

Second, and perhaps most crucial: social media and educational professionals should integrate it into structured pedagogies by using educational platforms as scaffolding systems.

Digital Literacy and Ethics Programs: Schools must teach students digital ethics regarding sharing, privacy, and understanding algorithms, which should be part of any social media application in educational spaces.

Promoting Multilingual Expression: Educational institutions and organisations should enable students to speak their home languages. This aligns with NEP's multilingual objectives and promotes self-efficacy and comprehension.

Boundaries and Digital Pauses: Teachers can create "no notifications" timeframes or designated social media usage times to help with distractions and scattered focus.

Infrastructure and Equity Measures: Governments and schools need to invest in durable telecommunications access in rural areas and subsidise devices and apps that can be accessed without going offline. Social media has the potential to bridge the digital divide.

Variety in Platforms to Prevent Manipulation: As "The Circle" warns against the reach of single-platform hegemony, educational systems are advised against using a single social media platform. Using multiple tools is a preventative measure to reduce the possibility of algorithmic entrapment, some of which could also protect privacy.

The big change from hashtags to classrooms. Social media has the power to create new ways of learning. But unlocking that potential requires conscious design, nuanced contextual awareness, and critical engagement. The hopefulness behind NEP 2020 as the anchor of new education is offset by the realisation that the success of education as a digital transformation will rely on contributions from educators, students, and policymakers to meet the challenges of the new digital culture presented by its dual nature. With an emphasis on individual voices, multilingual identities, and promoting critical engagement around technology and education, social media can shift from a means of distraction to a tool for educational.

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