

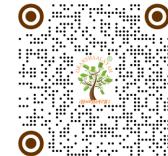
Original Article

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR PROTEST MOBILISATION AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE: DIGITAL ACTIVISM, CELEBRITY INFLUENCE AND OFFLINE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Social media platforms increasingly function as critical sites for mobilisation, meaning-making, and collective action in response to violent crime. This study examines how social media facilitated public mobilisation, awareness generation, and protest participation following the rape and murder of a postgraduate trainee doctor at a public hospital in Kolkata in 2024. Drawing on survey data from 80 active social media users aged 18 and above, the research analyses patterns of online activism, the role of celebrity interventions, and the translation of digital outrage into offline protest participation. Findings indicate that while social media significantly amplifies awareness and symbolic solidarity, it only partially translates into sustained physical participation in protest marches. Concerns regarding misinformation and selective trust in public figures further complicate digital mobilisation. The study contributes to criminological and justice-oriented scholarship by highlighting the limits and possibilities of digital activism in contemporary movements against gender-based violence.

**Keywords:** Social Media Activism, Sexual Violence, Protest Mobilisation, Digital Misinformation, Celebrity Influence

### INTRODUCTION

Before the popularization of social media, communications to the public were restricted to television, newspapers, radio, and word of mouth, digital media revolutionized how information is created and shared and the evolution of media has been particularly impactful in cases of protest movements and public unrest social media has become an effective tool in mobilizing support across physical boundaries for a variety of causes, such as policy change, humanitarian projects, and activism. [Palmieri-Branco \(2021\)](#)

### ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

From posting hashtags to finding like-minded communities, social media has transformed where, when, and how people engage with civic and political activities. [Bestvater et al. \(2023\)](#) Activists can use social media platforms to raise public awareness, generate public pressure, and advocate for policy changes by strategically leveraging hashtags, viral campaigns, and online petitions. By doing so, they can spark conversations, shift public opinion, and compel policymakers to address pressing social issues. [Rizal \(2024\)](#)

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## **KOLKATA SEXUAL VIOLENCE CASE AT WORKPLACE: BACKGROUND**

On August 9, 2024, a 31-year-old postgraduate trainee doctor at a Hospital in Kolkata was found dead with injuries on her body inside the seminar hall of the hospital, the next day itself, Kolkata police arrested one accused in connection with the rape and murder of the postgraduate trainee doctor, later an autopsy report confirmed murder following the sexual assault which led to Indian Medical Association and protesting doctors' demand immediate action for speedy trials, subsequently the protests grew stronger with doctors across the country coming together demanding action. [Jacob \(2024\)](#)

## **ONLINE PLEA FOR OFFLINE PROTEST: WOMEN CLAIMED THE NIGHT**

The 'Reclaim the Night' movement began in Leeds, England to reclaim the freedom for women to move in public spaces at night, the first march on November 12, 1977, came in response to the Yorkshire Ripper murders [Benton \(2022\)](#), boosted by a similar agenda, Rimjhim Sinha, a researcher and social activist initially called for Reclaim the Night protests through her Facebook post, however, the post quickly went viral, igniting a wave of decentralized activism as individuals and groups across West Bengal, later India, and even outside of the country started organizing their own protests without a central leadership structure, demonstrating the organic nature of the movement, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp played a crucial role in spreading information rapidly through posters, and calls to action banners [Samanta and Banerjee \(2025\)](#) of the protest titled 'Reclaim the Night' had flooded social media, urging people from all walks of life to participate in march from 11.55 pm as India got ready to celebrate its 78th Independence Day at the stroke of midnight. The mass upsurge of women and gender minorities under the banner of "Reclaim the Night" powerfully reasserted the right to gender justice, freedom & safety raising slogans for uprooting the Brahmanical patriarchal system, lakhs of women, trans, and queer individuals along with healthcare workers, civil society members and students-youth organizations across West Bengal gathered in protest against sexual violence, the battle for justice soon spread over other cities and towns of India including Mumbai, Patna and Delhi, to claim the night and ensure women's freedom, it demonstrated how feminist movements are spaces for celebrating difference and diversity. [Mukherjee \(2024\)](#)

## **CELEBRITY ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

When public personalities voice their opinions on raging societal issues, it can only serve two purposes: it either can be a game-changing move for their "public image" and career or a marketing error for the concerned celebrity if they fail to connect with the ordinary masses. Civilians share a close relationship with their favourite celebrities, where their every public or private activity is idolised on social platforms, resulting in the fans developing a "sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity"; this is termed parasocial relationships. [Chung et al. \(2017\)](#) In a way, celebrities are accessible, and it is easy to leave a comment on an Instagram post or make a TikTok "calling out" their actions. It also goes back to the idea of parasocial relationships; hence, fans feel like their idols have the responsibility to support the same issues they do. [Moldoveanu \(2023\)](#)

As citizens across the country took to the streets to protest the gruesome rape and murder of the trainee doctor at a Hospital in Kolkata, several Bollywood actors and celebrities also joined the call for justice on their official social media platforms, actors such as Priyanka Chopra, Hrithik Roshan, Kriti Sanon, Genelia D'Souza, Alia Bhatt, Suhana Khan, Parineeti Chopra, and Ayushmann expressed shock and grief over the horrific rape-murder in Hospital in Kolkata. [NDTV \(2024\)](#) Indian cricketer Mohammed Siraj also voiced his concerns over the recent rape and murder incident at a Hospital in Kolkata, through a story posted on his official Instagram handle, the Indian fast bowler criticized India's regressive mindset, which highlights how people in India often blame women after every sexual assault, along with Mohammed Siraj, cricketers Yuzvendra Chahal and Shreyas Iyer, the latter being associated with the official franchise cricket team of Kolkata that plays Indian Premiere League, have also spoken out on their official Instagram pages, condemning the horrific crime in the Hospital in Kolkata. [ABP \(2024\)](#) But on the contrary, some celebrities and actors who have attempted to show their support for the protests demanding justice for the raped and murdered doctor have faced backlash from the public, who accused them of turning it into a public stunt. Certain sections of the public have criticised celebrities, such as Bengali actresses Rituparna Sengupta, Aparna Sen, among others, for allegedly using the event to garner attention. [Panwar \(2024\)](#)

## **INFLUENCING VOICES AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN BENGAL**

### **Swastika Mukherjee**

One of the prominent Bengali actresses, and an ardent supporter of human & animal rights, condemned the heinous crime of rape and murder at a Hospital in Kolkata and aimed to draw the public attention to the structural issues that women in India confront, particularly in terms of basic human safety. Swastika Mukherjee called for "azadi from abuse" and demanded strict punishment for those convicted of rape. She publicly stated that the protests shall gain momentum as days pass, and firmly asserted that the arrest of the convicts of the incident is crucial for setting an example that the safety of women at the workplace is not a joke. [Telegraph \(2024\)](#)

### Niranjan Mondal

Niranjan Mondal, popularly known as "Laughter Sane," is a well-known Bengali content creator on Instagram, who is renowned for his satirical takes on daily life shenanigans and societal concerns, was one of the numerous voices calling for justice. Niranjan Mondal has over a million followers on Instagram and is known for multi-character sketches. He put out a reel sketch on why educating boys, too, is important, the four characters, all played by him, also spoke about good touch and bad touch, and the video highlighted the importance of teaching the difference between good touch and bad touch, especially for boys, that education is important, that instead of focusing only on oneself, it's essential to teach children to be assertive, not just passive spectators," said the mother's character in Niranjan Mondal's reel labeled, 'POV: Education'. [Mukul \(2024\)](#)

### Kiran Dutta

Kiran is a Bengali YouTuber, Comedian, and well-known Internet personality popularly known as the "Bong Guy"; he has successfully clocked more than 3.71M subscribers across social media platforms. [Jaiswal \(2022\)](#) He posted a candid video sharing his thoughts regarding the Hospital in Kolkata incident, he stated that maybe now the country is protesting for justice against the rape and murder at the Hospital in Kolkata. Still, many such incidents go unreported at the grassroots, and do not see the face of justice, he highlighted that how in everyday life a woman feels unsafe, that the perpetrators take advantage of buses and trams, a woman also faces sexual harassment in their own family, the vocal protests against these gradually subside, because only a woman's morality is questioned in India after getting molested. Still, a man is never questioned for disrobing a woman; he urged that the punishments of the proven convicts in the case should be gruesome so that the soul trembles with fear as soon as anyone tries to commit a similar crime. [Samadder \(2024\)](#)

### Unmesh Ganguly

Bengali content creator Unmesh Ganguly of #BankuraMemes was one of those who highlighted the unity and promised to keep fighting for justice for the rape and murder case at a Hospital in Kolkata, Unmesh's YouTube channel, Bankura Memes, has 6 lakh subscribers and over 1.6 lakh followers on Instagram, he posted a video lauding the supporters of the Kolkata football club, East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, who usually don't see eye to eye as rival clubs, but joined hands to demand justice for the Kolkata rape-murder victim, in his Instagram reel Unmesh Ganguly, slammed the government of the state, he mentioned that the protest will not stop but grow even if authorities arrest activists, echoing the popular sentiment of his followers in West Bengal. [Mukul \(2024\)](#)

### Arijit Singh

Bollywood singer Arijit Singh hails from Murshidabad in West Bengal. [Ghosh \(2023\)](#) He joined the chorus of people in favour of the current protests against the rape and murder of a trainee doctor at a Hospital in Kolkata, the musician showed his support for the victim by releasing a new Bengali song on his official YouTube account called 'Aar Kobe', a hand is depicted in the song, which calls for justice for the departed trainee physician, the song, which lasts three minutes and thirteen seconds, expresses 'solidarity with all women who face the horrors of gender-based violence' and begs for the victim's justice. [Garg \(2024\)](#)

## COMBATING DIGITAL MISINFORMATION AMID MASS PROTEST

The advent of social media has transformed how information is disseminated during high-profile legal cases, but the same platforms that democratize public discourse also enable rapid circulation of misinformation—false or misleading information shared regardless of intent—which can seriously compromise judicial fairness and public understanding, according to research, misinformation spreads quickly on digital networks, driven by platform algorithms and emotional engagement, often outpacing accurate information and shaping public opinion before judicial facts are fully established. [Surjatmodjo et al. \(2024\)](#)

In the judicial context, this phenomenon often manifests as "trial by media," where unverified claims, sensational narratives, or prejudicial commentary about the guilt or innocence of parties circulate widely on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, potentially undermining the presumption of innocence and the integrity of court proceedings. [Roy \(2025\)](#)

The consequences of such misinformation extend beyond courtroom outcomes to societal trust and citizen behaviour. Distorted narratives on social media can erode confidence in the legal system, polarize communities, and motivate users to act on inaccuracies (e.g., sharing false accusations or pressuring judicial actors online), thereby complicating ongoing investigations and potentially influencing legal strategies [Surjatmodjo et al. \(2024\)](#) Research also suggests that misinformation may even impact judicial independence indirectly, as judges and legal professionals navigate public scrutiny and backlash amplified online, potentially introducing conscious or unconscious biases into decision-making. [Journal of Modern Law and Policy \(2024\)](#)

The Kolkata Police issued warnings against misinformation and fake news circulating on social media in light of the rape and murder case of a trainee doctor at a hospital in Kolkata. [Ghosh \(2024\)](#) The Kolkata police also arrested a college student for sharing posts containing life threats to the Chief Minister of West Bengal and for revealing the identity of the victim in the Kolkata rape-murder case; eminent doctors like cardiologist Kunal Sarkar and public health expert Subarna Goswami, who had been summoned to appear before the police; the Kolkata Police Commissioner further warned against spreading misinformation to social media users. [Chatterjee \(2024\)](#)

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Is social media a convenient catalyst to bring necessary societal changes?
- 2) Do online outrages have judicial validation amidst much misinformation on social media?

## OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore whether social media platforms, (Instagram, Facebook, 'X' formerly known as Twitter, and WhatsApp), can be used as forums to organize mass actions against sexual abuse, raise awareness, and magnify voices.
- 2) To explore the challenges and awareness regarding the rapid spread of false information on social media among active users.
- 3) To investigate how the online community gathers for offline protests in the context of the sexual violence incident at a hospital in Kolkata

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed an exploratory survey design to examine patterns of social media engagement and protest participation in the context of a specific sexual violence incident in Kolkata. A total of 80 valid responses were collected using voluntary involvement. Given the event-specific and context-bound nature of the study, the sample size is considered methodologically adequate for identifying descriptive trends and behavioural tendencies rather than for statistical generalisation. In communication and digital activism research, similar sample sizes have been widely used in exploratory and issue-focused studies, particularly where the objective is to understand platform use, awareness, and participation patterns. [Chadha and Harlow \(2015\)](#) Moreover, the sensitive nature of the topic and ethical considerations surrounding discussions of sexual violence influenced participation rates, making a moderate sample size both realistic and appropriate for the scope of this research. Survey data was obtained from active social media users to explore online activism on social media, including how people engage with issues they care about and the value they place on these platforms when building community and sharing their views. [Bestvater et al. \(2023\)](#)

## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection was conducted during the final week of August 2024 through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to reach active social media users aged 18 years and above, aligning with the study's objective of examining online activism and protest-related engagement. Responses were collected between 28 August 2024 and 2 September 2024, yielding a total of 80 valid responses.

All respondents were active users of at least one social media platform, ensuring relevance to the investigation of digital mobilisation. The sample reflected diversity in gender and intensity of social media usage.

**Table 1**

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 80)		
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	55	68.4
Male	25	31.6

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

## SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE PATTERNS

Respondents reported high levels of daily engagement with social media platforms, indicating sustained exposure to online content, including protest-related information.

**Table 2**

Table 2 Average Daily Time Spent on social media	
Time Spent per Day	Percentage
Less than 2 hours	26.8
2-4 hours	39.2
4-6 hours	34.0

Instagram emerged as the most frequently used platform among respondents, followed by Facebook and WhatsApp.

**Table 3**

<b>Table 3 Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms</b>	
<b>Platform</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Instagram	58.2
Facebook	25.3
WhatsApp	20.3
X (Twitter)	9.0

**EXPOSURE TO HASHTAG CAMPAIGNS AND PROTEST CONTENT**

A substantial proportion of respondents reported regular exposure to hashtag campaigns, reflecting the visibility of digitally mediated protest narratives.

**Table 4**

<b>Table 4 Frequency of Encountering Hashtag Campaigns</b>	
<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Daily	47.5
Occasionally	39.8
Never	12.7

Awareness of globally significant hashtag movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter was high, though not universal.

**Table 5**

<b>Table 5 Awareness of Major Hashtag Campaigns</b>	
<b>Awareness Level</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Aware	64.6
Not aware	20.3
Unsure	15.1

**ONLINE AMPLIFICATION AND INFORMATION VERIFICATION**

More than half of the respondents reported occasional engagement in amplifying protest-related content, while a smaller proportion actively shared such content.

**Table 6**

<b>Table 6 Frequency of Amplifying Protest-Related Content</b>	
<b>Engagement Level</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Actively share	19.0
Occasionally share	54.4
Rarely/Never	26.6

Verification behaviour revealed mixed levels of caution.

**Table 7**

<b>Table 7 Verification of Information Before Sharing</b>	
<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Always verify	65.8
Sometimes verify	20.3
Rarely/Never	13.9

## INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC PERSONALITIES

Respondents expressed ambivalence regarding the influence and credibility of celebrities and influencers.

**Table 8**

Table 8 Perceived Influence of Public Personalities	
Response	Percentage
Not influenced	54.4
Somewhat influenced	36.7
Highly influenced	8.9

**Table 9**

Table 9 Public Personalities as Reliable Sources of Information	
Response	Percentage
Reliable	45.6
Not reliable	46.8
Unsure	7.6

## OFFLINE PROTEST PARTICIPATION

Despite high levels of online awareness, regular offline protest participation remained limited.

**Table 10**

Table 10 Frequency of Offline Protest Participation	
Participation Level	Percentage
Regularly participate	5.1
Sometimes participate	49.4
Rarely/Never	38.0

Awareness of the Kolkata hospital sexual violence case was nearly universal.

**Table 11**

Table 11 Awareness of the Kolkata Hospital Sexual Violence Case	
Awareness	Percentage
Aware	96.2
Not aware	2.5
Unsure	1.3

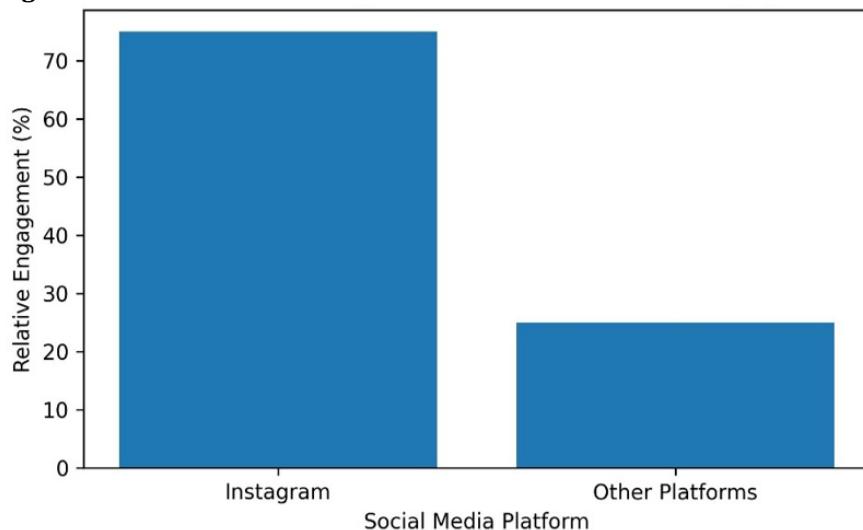
Participation in the “Reclaim the Night” protest further illustrates the gap between online mobilisation and physical presence.

**Table 12**

Table 12 Participation in the “Reclaim the Night” Protest	
Mode of Participation	Percentage
Physically participated	22.8
Did not participate	38.0
Amplified online only	30.4

## DISCUSSIONS

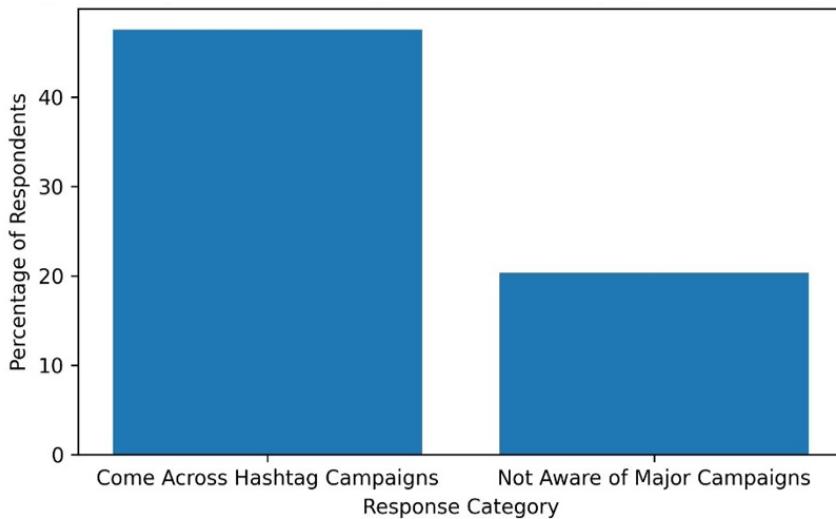
**Figure 1**



**Figure 1 Dominance of Instagram in Activism-Oriented Engagement (n = 80)**

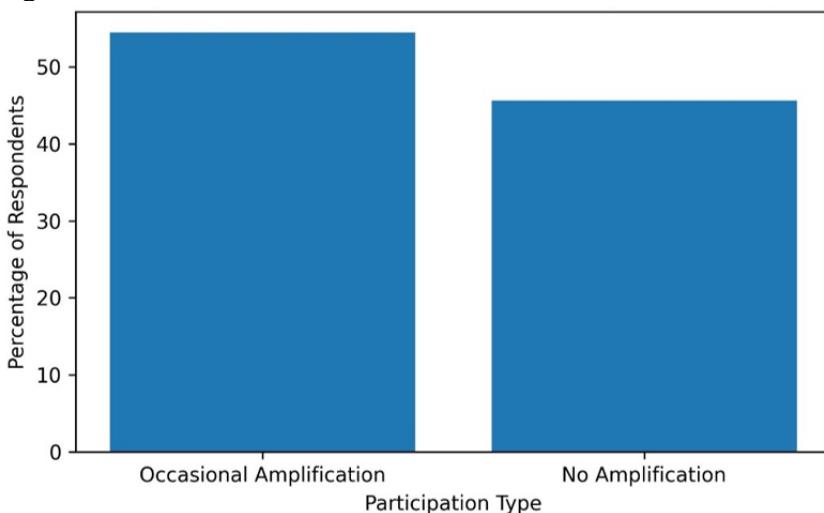
Figure 1 illustrates the centrality of Instagram in respondents' digital routines and its dominance over other platforms in activism-oriented engagement. The high relative engagement with Instagram reflects its transformation from a leisure-centric application into a critical socio-political information space. This supports existing scholarship that identifies visual platforms as affective infrastructures where political awareness, emotional resonance, and peer visibility converge. In the context of sexual violence discourse, Instagram's affordances—such as stories, templates, and rapid recirculation—facilitate low-barrier participation while maximising visibility.

**Figure 2**

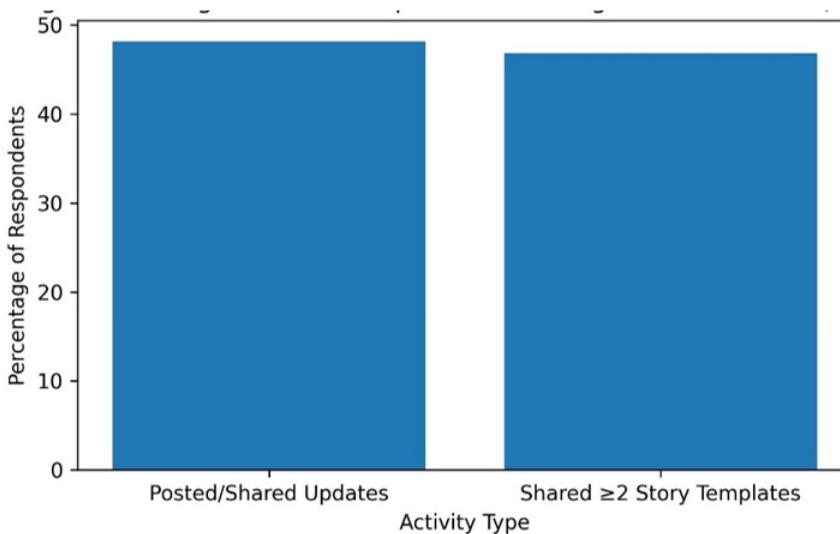


**Figure 2 Exposure to Hashtag Activism Versus Awareness of Major Campaigns (n = 80)**

As shown in Figure 2, while 47.5% of respondents reported encountering hashtag campaigns, 20.3% indicated a lack of awareness of globally prominent movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. However, within its first year in 2017, the #MeToo hashtag was used more than 19 million times. [Anderson et al. \(2018b\)](#) From July 2013 through May 1, 2018, the hashtag #blacklivesmatter has been used nearly 30 million times, an average of 17,002 times per day. [Anderson et al. \(2018a\)](#) Despite the historical prominence and scale of these campaigns, their meanings appear unevenly distributed across users. The figure reinforces critiques of hashtag activism that question its capacity to generate sustained collective consciousness beyond momentary visibility.

**Figure 3****Figure 3 Levels of Online Protest Participation (n = 80)**

The online protest participation is largely characterised by intermittent engagement. While 54.4% of respondents reported occasional amplification of online protests, a substantial proportion refrained from engaging altogether. This pattern suggests that digital activism in this context operates primarily through episodic participation rather than sustained political involvement. Such engagement enables symbolic alignment with social causes while requiring minimal time, risk, or commitment, a pattern consistent with broader critiques of “low-cost” digital activism.

**Figure 4****Figure 4 Instagram-Based Amplification During the Kolkata Hospital Incident (n = 80)**

Here, we focus on platform-specific engagement during the sexual violence incident at a hospital in Kolkata. Nearly half of the respondents shared updates related to the case on Instagram, and a comparable proportion reposted at least 2 story templates. The prominence of templated content reflects a mode of participation driven by standardisation and repetition, allowing users to express solidarity quickly and visibly. While this enhances the reach of activist messaging, it also indicates a reliance on pre-packaged expressions of dissent, raising questions about the depth and sustainability of engagement.

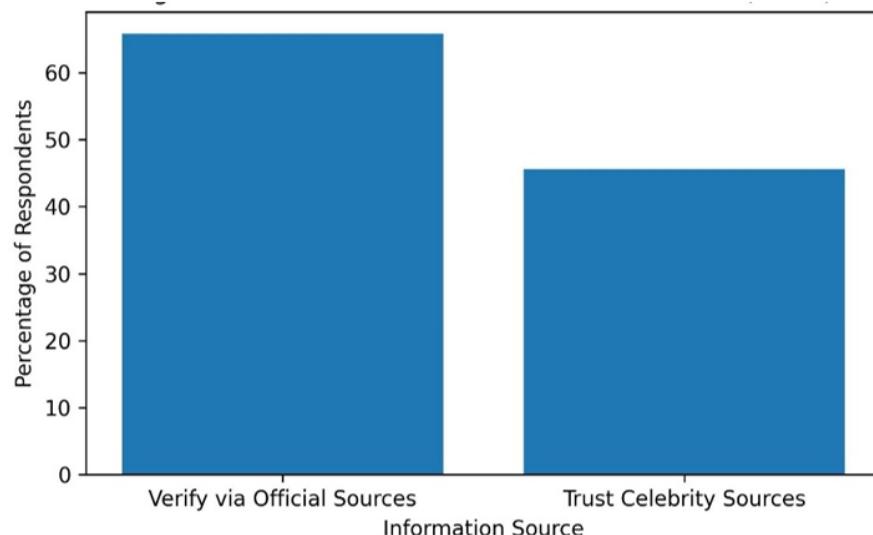
**Figure 5****Figure 5 Verification Practices and Trust in Information Sources (n = 80)**

Figure 5 reveals a complex negotiation of trust in digital information ecosystems. While 65.8% of respondents reported verifying information through official sources, 45.6% expressed trust in information shared by celebrities or public figures they follow. This coexistence of scepticism and reliance underscores the role of parasocial relationships in shaping perceptions of credibility. Even in the context of sensitive issues such as sexual violence, trust is not solely institutional but relational, complicating efforts to counter misinformation during moments of rapid digital mobilisation.

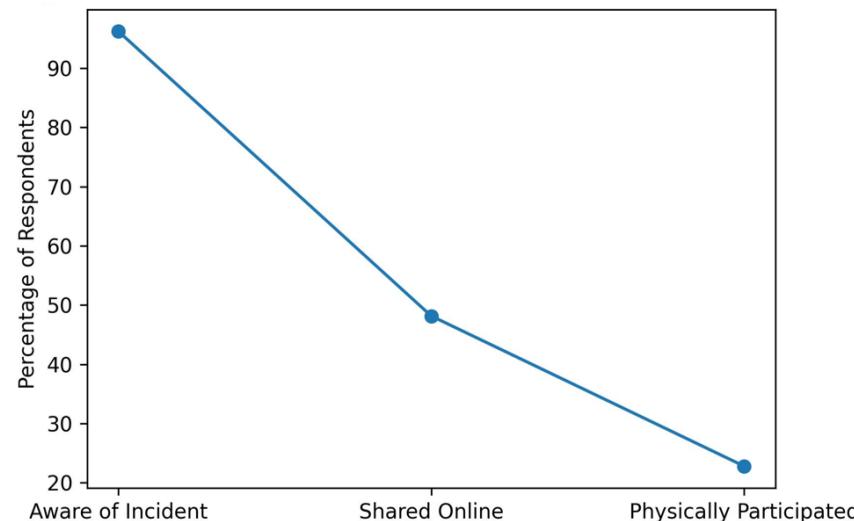
**Figure 6****Figure 6 Attrition from Online Awareness to Offline Protest Participation (n = 80)**

Figure 6 visualises the sharp decline from near-universal awareness of the Kolkata incident (96.2%) to significantly lower levels of offline protest participation (22.8%). Although nearly half of the respondents shared updates online, far fewer translated digital engagement into physical presence at protest marches such as “Reclaim the Night.” This attrition underscores structural and affective barriers to offline mobilisation, including safety concerns, logistical constraints, and convenience. The figure reinforces the argument that social media functions more effectively as a space for symbolic solidarity and awareness-building than as a mechanism for sustained embodied collective action.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social media platforms in organising collective responses to sexual violence, amplifying voices, and facilitating transitions from online awareness to offline protest, with particular attention to Instagram-mediated activism during the sexual violence incident at a hospital in Kolkata. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an indispensable infrastructure for contemporary feminist mobilisation, yet its capacity to sustain deep political engagement and embodied collective action remains constrained.

The dominance of Instagram underscores the growing importance of visual, affect-driven communication in shaping public engagement with issues of sexual violence. High levels of daily platform use and routine content sharing indicate that activism is increasingly embedded within everyday digital practices rather than occurring as a separate political activity. Social media thus functions as a space where personal expression, emotional solidarity, and political signalling intersect, enabling rapid dissemination of information and widespread symbolic participation.

However, the study also reveals clear limitations of digital activism. While hashtag campaigns and story-based amplification enhance visibility, they do not ensure uniform awareness or sustained political consciousness. The partial recognition of globally prominent movements suggests that algorithmic circulation fragments publics and dilutes collective memory. Online participation, largely episodic and low-intensity, allows users to express alignment with feminist causes without requiring prolonged commitment, risk, or personal exposure.

The findings further highlight a persistent gap between online mobilisation and offline protest participation. Despite near-universal awareness of the Kolkata incident and significant online amplification, physical attendance at protest marches remained limited and contingent on logistical and safety considerations. This underscores the structural and gendered constraints shaping public participation, particularly in contexts involving sexual violence, where fears of harassment, surveillance, and personal risk may inhibit bodily presence in protest spaces.

Additionally, the study demonstrates the complexity of trust and information verification within digital activist ecosystems. While many users report reliance on official sources, a substantial proportion continue to trust information shared by familiar public figures, revealing the influence of parasocial relationships in shaping perceptions of credibility. This duality complicates efforts to counter misinformation during moments of heightened digital mobilisation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that social media should not be evaluated solely on its ability to produce mass street mobilisation. Instead, its significance lies in its role as an affective and discursive arena that enables awareness-building, emotional alignment, and agenda-setting. Digital feminist activism, as evidenced in this study, operates through visibility, repetition, and symbolic solidarity rather than continuous collective action. Recognising these dynamics allows for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary protest cultures and the evolving relationship between digital platforms and feminist resistance.

Future research may build on these findings by incorporating longitudinal designs, platform-comparative analyses, or qualitative interviews to examine how digital participation evolves and how activists negotiate the tensions between visibility, safety, and political efficacy. As social media continues to mediate responses to gendered violence, understanding both its possibilities and limitations remains crucial for scholars, activists, and policymakers alike.

## LIMITATIONS

While the sample size limits broader generalisability, the findings offer valuable insights into platform-mediated activism and public engagement in the immediate aftermath of a gender-based violence incident.

## SCOPE

- 1) The effect of peer pressure to share content, and personal opinions and seek validation on raging issues on social media.
- 2) Is participating in offline protest marches a lifestyle statement and part of “woke culture” that is further enhanced by active posting on social media platforms?

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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