

## Social Media and Public Interest Issues

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### Abstract

Indians, particularly the young among them, have shown one of the highest propensity rates in the world to adopt new media. Open platform websites and mobile applications have virtually replaced the traditional media for those between 15 and 25 years of age. Many older consumers too are dividing their information-getting time between the new and the traditional media. The social media, thus, has become a potent new tool for public relations. In this paper, the effect of social media on public relations has been discussed, using some outstanding cases. In a recent days, it ishas been observed that the Prime Minister of India, the chief ministers of Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and some other states; have been regularly using their twitter handles for making public their views on various issues. The objective behind writing this paper is to summarize different aspects of social media, views of young India and other aspects related to it.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Media, Public Relations, Public Interest, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp

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### INTRODUCTION:

Mass media communication has always been greatly impacted by technology. The advent of the Internet and the enabling of open platforms and mobile phone applications has revolutionised the way people communicate and created a new space among the mass communication media. Indians, who until recently were generally consuming the traditional media, have taken to the new media in exponentially increasing numbers. The easy availability and affordability of the hardware, i.e. smartphones, the software, i.e. free sites and applications and the network (Internet) have combined to ensure that a large number of people, mainly the youth, in India are now using social media websites and apps (applications) such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc.)

Social Media has caught the attention of the Indian society in a way that never have been imagined five years ago. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc are becoming rapid and constant source of news for internet and smartphone users. The social media websites are also considered a channel through which users can have direct focus on the world and national news. Twitter is playing a very vital role for spreading news as it is being made by the news-makers and it also proved that it is ahead of traditional media. Recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered condolences on the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro using Twitter. Leaders, celebrities and public figures across the globe and equally in India have been seen using this medium so often and to such effect that the act of sending a message on Twitter, dubbed as 'Tweeting' has found its way into the dictionaries of several languages, including English. Similarly, for a slightly older lot, it is Facebook that is the preferred medium of sending across news, information, thoughts and views.

Country	Facebook Users (million)	Population (million)	% Facebook Users
India	195.16	1252	15.59
United States	191.3	318.9	59.99
Brazil	90.11	200.4	44.97
Indonesia	77.58	249.9	31.04
China	52.87	1357	3.90
Mexico	46.03	122.3	37.64
Phillipines	39.82	98.39	40.47
Germany	36.82	80.62	45.67
United Kingdom	36.45	64.1	56.86
Turkey	33.09	74.93	44.16
France	30.39	66.03	46.02
Japan	28.21	127.3	22.16
Italy	28.18	59.83	47.10
Canada	22.37	35.16	63.62
Spain	21.48	47.77	44.97

Table No.1. Facebook users across major countries and their percentage with respect to population

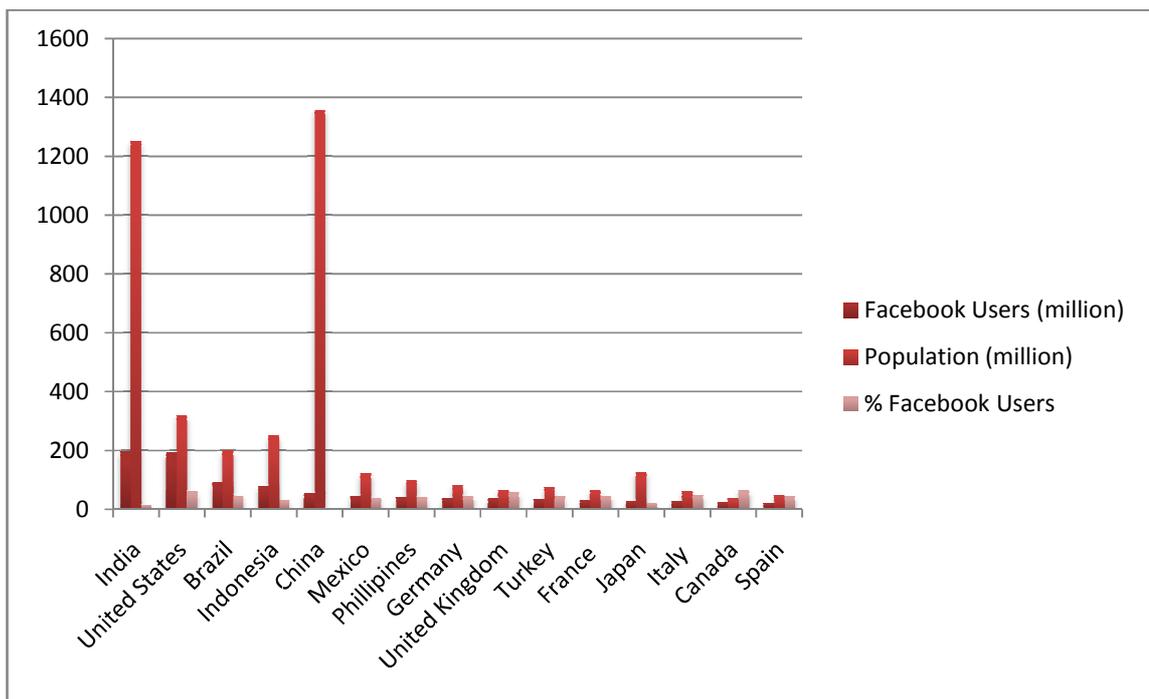


Figure No.1. Graph of Facebook users in various countries and corresponding population.

Country	Twitter users (million)	Population (million)	% Twitter Users
India	23.2	1252	1.85
United States	67	318.9	21.01
Brazil	14.2	200.4	7.09
Indonesia	29	249.9	11.60
China	10	1357	0.74
Mexico	8.54	122.3	6.98
Phillipines	10.4	98.39	10.57
Germany	8.27	80.62	10.26
United Kingdom	16.4	64.1	25.59
Turkey	6.5	74.93	8.67
France	21.1	66.03	31.96
Japan	25.5	127.3	20.03
Italy	23.3	59.83	38.94
Canada	6.8	35.16	19.34
Spain	19.8	47.77	41.45

Table No.2. Twitter users Across major countries and their percentage with respect to population

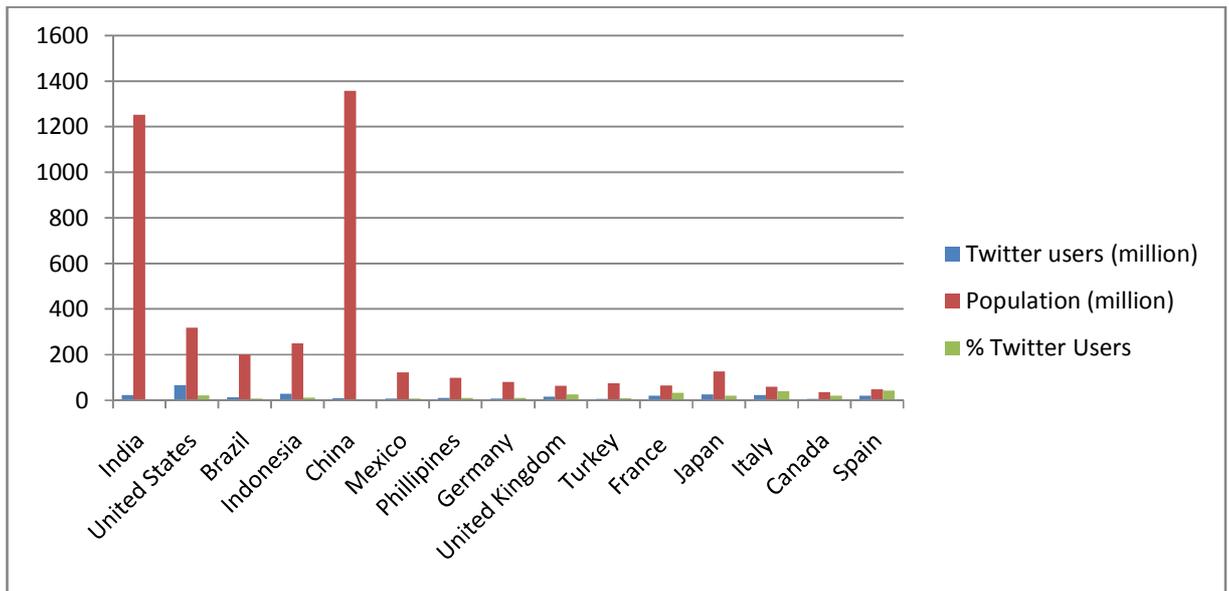
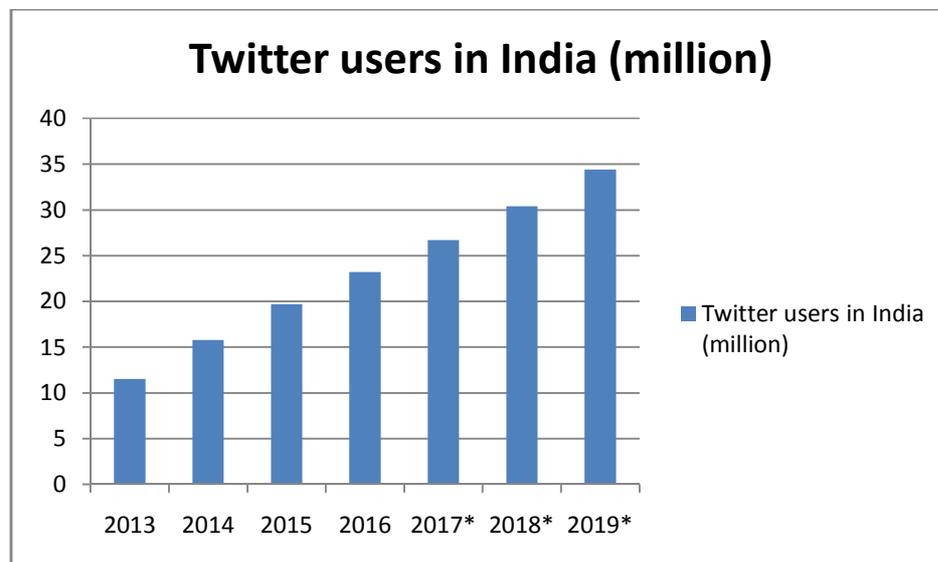


Figure no 2. Graph of twitter users Across major countries and their percentage with respect to population

Year	Twitter users in India (million)
2013	11.5
2014	15.8
2015	19.7
2016	23.2
2017*	26.7
2018*	30.4
2019*	34.4

**Table No.3. Twitter users in India from 2013 to 2019**



**Figure No.3. Graph of twitter users in India**

The statistics given in tables 1,2 and 3, will help in understanding the popularity and penetration of Facebook and Twitter in India in comparison with various other countries.

### **CASE-I**

Demonetisation of Rs. 500 & Rs. 1000 notes:

The demonetisation of Rs. 500 and Rs.1000 notes was announced by the Indian prime minister on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at 8:15pm in an unscheduled TV telecast. The announcement was very clear the Rs. 500 and Rs.1000 currency notes would cease being legal tender from 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016. In their place, the Reserve Bank of India would issue new notes of Rs. 500 and Rs. 2000 in coming days. The government said this sudden move would help in fighting black money and stop circulation of counterfeit currency allegedly used for funding terrorism.

The matter was of immense public interest and the announcement immediately caused shock and confusion which people vented through social media. Most people wanted to know the logic behind the action, some lauded it while others seemed to take it with a pinch of salt.

Here are some samples:

“No journo had idea about Modi’s address. No sources had idea about decision on Rs500 and Rs 1000... This is truly emergency like situation” – Paresh Rawal fa? (@Babu\_Bhaiyaa)

“2 mins silence of all builders & other businessmen who gave him money for the most expensive election ever. Enjoy! Rs 500 and 1000” – Tehseen Poonawala (@tehseenp)

“PM #Modi was miffed that we were all so transfixed by #USElections2016” – Rajkrishnan Menon (@RajkrisMenon)

“A Scene right out of @shankarshanmugh & @superstarrajini #Sivaji is now a reality!! Rs 500 and Rs 1000” – S S Music (@SSMusicTweet)

“Other people: Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes will be illegal from midnight. What will we do!? Me & My crumpled Rs 10 notes: It’s our time now.” - Paloma Sharma (@Paloma Sharma)

“Surgical Strike on Black Money! Prime Minister Modi says Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes to be banned from midnight!” \_ Anjana Om Kashyap (@Anjanaomkashyap)

### **RESULTS OF SURVEY ON NARENDRA MODI APP:**

On November 21, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked the people to participate in a survey to gauge the mood of the Indian citizens after his demonetization move. “I want your first-hand view on the decision taken regarding currency notes. Take part in the survey on the NM App,” he tweeted. A day later, he shared the results.

The results showed that demonetisation had the support of over 93 percent of the 5,00,000 people who took the survey on the Narendra Modi app+, according to a statement put out by Prime Minister Modi's website. The release said only two percent viewed the demonetization negatively.

An infographic on Modi's website said the survey on the Narendra Modi app received more than 400 responses every minute. The respondents were from 2000 different locations, with 93 percent of them in India. Also, 24 percent of those surveyed had responded in Hindi.

The 500,000 who reportedly took the survey, did so in just over 15 hours. The numbers released were up to 3:30 pm on Wednesday, and the poll had begun at 10 am on Tuesday. "More than 90% of the respondents feel the government's move to tackle black money is above four-star rating. 73% of them give it five-star rating of brilliant," read the statement.

### **CASE-II**

#### **URI ATTACK**

In September 2016, four heavily-armed terrorists mounted an attack near the town of Uri in the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir. It was reported as "the

deadliest attack on security forces in Kashmir in two decades". The militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed was suspected of being involved in the planning and execution of the attack. At the time of the attack, the Kashmir Valley region was at the centre of unrest, during which 85 civilians were killed and thousands injured in clashes with security forces.

At around 5:30 a.m. on 18 September, four militants attacked an Indian Army brigade headquarters in Uri, near the Line of Control in a pre-dawn ambush. Media reports, quoting army sources, said they lobbed 17 grenades in three minutes. As a rear administrative base camp with tents caught fire. A gun battle ensued lasting six hours, during which all the four militants were killed. By September 30, according to the Indian Express, the number of deaths among Indian soldiers had risen to 20.

Reactions from Indian citizens followed:

**Patriot Civilian (Comment on TOI news 19sept)**

“Army should be independent in taking strategic decisions. There should be no intervention by a civilian government. As long civilian government acts as army chief, army men will continue losing valuable life.”

**Dwibhashyam Agasthyeswar(Comment on TOI news 19sept)**

“It is time Modi and Rajnath quit and handover Government to able politicians like Advani, Sinha, Arun Shourie. India cannot sacrifice its armed forces for terrorists from Pakistan. Modi Govt. miserably failed and BJP leadership to open eyes and strengthen.”

**Sharad Lotlikar (Comment on TOI news 19sept)**

“Dastardly attack by pak sponsored terrorists! India should employ option of entering point of their entry and finish them before they attack!”

Nearly 10 days after the Uri attack, India hit back with its own “Surgical Strike” – a term that has been made commonplace now by politicians and twitterati. The government claimed that seven terror “launch pads” were destroyed during the surgical strike.

On 29 September, senior BJP leader and Union Home Minister, Rajnath Singh, tweeted: “Congratulations to the Indian Army on successful counter terrorism operations against the terror groups and their launching pads.”

Another senior BJP Minister, Arun Jaitley, tweeted on the same day: “We are proud of #IndianArmy for taking pre-emptiveaction and repelling terrorists’ attempt to destabilize peace and tranquility in the region.”

Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has regularly communicated through his Twitter handle, chose to maintain complete silence in the days following the Surgical Strikes. The common Twitterati, however, were very active on this issue of public interest:

### **Reaction on twitter after surgical strikes carried out by Indian Military**

Bhakts 2 saal se bhare baithe the... aaj jaakar unki aatma ko 'thodi' shaanti mili hogi. #ModiPunishesPak #IndiaStrikesBack

— Paresh Rawal (@Babu\_Bhaiyaa) September 29, 2016

Determined action by our forces in First ever #SurgicalStrike against Lanch Pads in Pakistan is a way #IndiaGivesItBack #ModiPunishesPak ??????

— Meenakashi Lekhi (@M\_Lekhi) September 29, 2016

Pakistan killed by Army. #ModiPunishesPak

— Maheish Girri (@MaheishGirri) September 29, 2016

Early Diwali for India? #ModiPunishesPak Glad to hear about surgical strikes by #IndianArmy . Respect ??

— Shikhar Jiwrajka (@shikharjiwrajka) September 29, 2016

Really proud of #IndianArmy for conducting surgical strikes across LOC to neutralise terrorists.Really bold step taken by @PMOIndia ??????

— Madhur Bhandarkar (@imbhandarkar) September 29,2016

Congratulations to the Indian Army for #SurgicalStrikes to safeguard our nation. We are committed to fighting against terror in the region.

— Piyush Goyal (@PiyushGoyal) September 29, 2016

Congratulate the #IndianArmy for successfully carrying out surgical strikes in PoK. Namo Govt is fully committed in its war against terror.

— Dharmendra Pradhan (@dpradhanbjp) September 29, 2016

### **CASE –III**

#### **2012 DELHI GANG RAPE (NIRBHAYA CASE)**

The 2012 Delhi gang rape case involved a rape and fatal assault that occurred on 16 December 2012 in Munirka, a neighborhood in South Delhi. The incident took place when a 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern, was beaten, gang raped, and tortured in a private bus in which she was traveling with her friend. There were six others in the bus, including the driver, all of whom raped the woman and beat her friend. Eleven days after the assault, she was transferred to a hospital in Singapore for emergency treatment, but died from her injuries two days later. The incident generated widespread national and international coverage and was widely condemned, both in India and abroad. Subsequently, public protests against the state and central governments for failing to provide adequate security for women took place in New Delhi, where thousands of protesters clashed with security forces. Similar protests took place in major cities throughout the country. Since there is a law in India that does not allow the press to

publicise a rape victim's name, the victim has become widely known as *Nirbhaya*, meaning "fearless", and her life and death have come to symbolise women's struggle to end rape and the long-held practice of blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Protests occurred online as well on the social networking sites Facebook and WhatsApp, with users replacing their profile images with a black dot symbol. Tens of thousands signed an online petition protesting the incident.

### **Twitter Reactions on Nirbhaya case**

PRITISH NANDY, media personality "A suggestion for Mr Shinde, Home Minister: Why doesn't the Govt put up hoardings everywhere, saying: Rape Strictly Prohibited?"

FARHAN AKHTAR, actor "Yes we can stoop lower as a people. The Delhi bus gang-rape is proof of that. Is justice asleep? I believe swift and severe punishment is the only deterrent. These deviants are not afraid of consequence as it comes too little too late."

JUHI CHAWLA, actor "Read the newspaper this morning and wish I hadn't. Read the heart rendering, shocking, saddening news about the gang-rape on a Delhi bus!"

FARAH KHAN, film-maker "Sometimes I think the Shariat law would work well, we are becoming a country of barbarians."

JATIN KOCHAR, fashion designer "New Delhi gang-rape...shameful and shameless."

HARSH VARDHAN, politician "The best way to get rid of a problem for the time being is to set up a committee and forget about it."

SALIM MERCHANT, film music composer "President, CJI: Stop Rape Now!"

YUVRAJ SINGH, cricketer "Shocked with the delhi rape incident. Something is terribly wrong somewhere. If this is the way women are treated God saves our society"

CHETAN BHAGAT, author "Don't know if every rape case should be punishable by death given the possible abuse of law but these bus rape guys probably deserve it"

BRAHMA CHELLANEY, strategic analyst "Whether it is black money, setting up an anti-graft ombudsman or combating rape, Indian democracy produces sound and fury signifying nothing"

AMITABH BACHCHAN, actor "Wanted to say so much of the day .. but so disturbed by the gang rape case in Delhi .. atrocious and unforgivable !!"

GUL PANAG, actress "It's time we stopped seeing this as a Delhi problem. Lack of safety of women is a systemic, endemic Indian problem."

AYAZ MEMON, cricket commentator "Sordid Delhi gang rape in a way holds up mirror to our society. "Wanted to teach girl a lesson" says culprits. What lesson do they deserve?"

KARAN JOHAR, film-maker "Disgusted and apalled at the tragic rape incident in Delhi...severe and immediate punishment has to be served!!! Its shameful...."

SOPHIE CHAUDRY, MTV VJ "SHAME! Takes incidents like Delhi gang-rape 4 ppl/MPs to show outrage! What about girls who r raped by family members?! Who's protecting them?"

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

In conclusion, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that the social media already holds considerable sway over the urban Indian society and this influence is growing fast. Public Interest issues, in particular, have involved common citizens in larger numbers and with greater impact because of the open platform nature of the networks where any participant has the power to make himself/herself heard.

When the Prime minister of the country uses social networking websites for delivering messages that range from congratulating Olympic winners and offering condolences on the death of eminent figures to investigating the public view on crucial decisions, such as demonetization, one can be sure that there is a felt impact.

It has been observed from the table 1,2 and 3 that the number internet users is increasing day by day. In India, those who are even marginally aware of the internet have social network accounts and actively participate by writing or sharing posts on a host of issues. Though the number of facebook and twitter users in India appears very small as a percentage of the population, they seem to be significant enough to make an impact by using social media.

In last three years, a significant reduction has been observed in the number of street protests and demonstrations. Although, it needs a dedicated study to arrive at specific conclusions, through observation it can be said that this reduction could be because social media offers a viable outlet. People feel less agitated after venting their feelings on social media with a sense of being heard not just by fellow citizens but also by those in power.

That the authorities have realized this is proved by the sensitivity to social media content shown, of late by political leaders and celebrities in particular. Besides the cases above, there are numerous instances of eminent persons and organizations, using the power of social media to create and maintain public relations.

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