

Social Media and Youth Sustainability: A Systematic Review

Ms. Shrishty Shahi¹, Dr. Parul Tripathi²

¹Research Scholar, Home Science Department, Extension Education and Communication, Banasthali Vidyapith

²Assistant Professor, Human development, Banasthali Vidyapith

Abstract

Media platforms are vital in influencing people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in a society that is becoming increasingly digital, especially among young people. Because social media makes participation and engagement easy, it is a preferred information channel for public and political players. Both political and social mobilisation among citizens can be facilitated by these new media. It is especially crucial for solving environmental problems and accomplishing sustainable development objectives. This review paper focuses on how digital media, influencers, online communities, and peer interactions support ecologically responsible behaviours to investigate how social media might be used to promote sustainable lifestyles among youth. In relation to sustainable consumption, waste reduction, ethical fashion, and climate-friendly activities, the review emphasises how social media platforms support informal learning, social norms, and group action.

Keywords: Social Media, Sustainable, Lifestyle, Youth Engagement, Digital Influence

Introduction

Media platforms are vital in influencing people's views, beliefs, and behaviours in an increasingly digital environment, especially among young people. Social media platforms that have emerged alongside notions of environmental sustainability now represent fertile ground for digital communications technologies to change perceptions and approaches to environmental issues. Sustainable communication approaches and practices are becoming more urgently needed throughout the world due to growing environmental issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. It is simple to understand how environmental issues have a detrimental impact on people's lives, and rapid climate change has been a hotly debated topic in recent years. Social media has become a major new source of entertainment in users' everyday lives because it contributes to spreading information of primary importance. Sustainability is often used interchangeably with words like "green" and "environment-friendly" (Peattie, 1995). Sustainable tourism is a concept that encourages the utilisation of tourism services while respecting people, tourists, culture, heritage, and the environment (Fien et al., 2010). Other studies have examined the link between public knowledge of climate change and social media. While environmental issues are becoming more known around the world, most previous research on environmental behaviours has been conducted in developed countries. By reducing and regulating the detrimental effects of garbage on ecosystems and natural resources, sustainable waste management techniques are crucial to environmental conservation. These procedures incorporate the appropriate handling of solid waste to guarantee that it is transformed into a resource that supports sustainable growth by offering inexpensive raw materials. According to scholarly studies, social media platforms have a big

impact in raising environmental consciousness. According to research by Lai and To (2015), users' comprehension of sustainability issues improved when they came across environmental material on Facebook and Twitter. According to Anderson's (2017) research, young adults' concern for the environment increased when they saw environmental content on Instagram. According to Hamid et al. (2017), visual-centred platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are suitable for teaching complex environmental information to non-professionals. Environmental degradation, climate change, excessive waste generation, and unsustainable consumption patterns pose serious challenges to global development. Youth, who constitute a significant proportion of the world's population, are both contributors to and victims of these challenges. At the same time, young people are among the most active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and emerging short-video applications. There are many methods to promote a sustainable lifestyle, but in this Review paper I have specifically focused on how waste can be reduced. There are many methods to promote a sustainable lifestyle, but in this Review paper I have specifically focused on how waste can be reduced. The production of waste has no beneficial effects on the climate. Both beneficial and detrimental effects on the climate might result from waste treatment and disposal; priority is given in order to waste minimisation, re-use, recycling, waste-to-energy, and finally landfill (See Fig.1)



Fig. 1 Waste Hierarchy Pyramid

Source - <https://nordsense.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Waste-Hierarchy.png>

For around 40 years, the waste hierarchy principle has been in place. Van Ewijk and Stegemann (2016) claim that the idea was first introduced in the United States by the private company 3M (Overcash, 2002) and in Europe by the Dutch politician Ad Lansink, who put forth the idea in the Dutch Parliament in 1979 (Parto et al., 2007). It is based on the idea of prioritising waste reduction, recycling, and reuse over treatment or disposal. The European WFD defines the waste hierarchy as the priority order of operations to be followed in the management of waste: prevention, preparing for reuse, recycling, other recovery (including energy recovery), and disposal. In 2016, the waste hierarchy was included in the 12th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the 193 United Nations countries (UN, 2016), named “Responsible consumption and production”: “by 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse”.

Reduction of waste. Reuse and recycling help accomplish post-generation. Developed and underdeveloped countries also have different recycling procedures. For instance, low-tech, poorly controlled paper recycling facilities in impoverished nations may have substantial greenhouse gas emissions, which could lessen the net climate benefit of paper recycling. However, it may be reasonable to expect improvement in facility performance across the globe as standards progress into the future. The informal recycling sector often plays a significant, yet largely unrecognised role in waste management of developing nation cities. For example, Delhi waste pickers collect and recycle 15-20% of the city's MSW (Chintan, 2009).

Rationale of the Study

The growing urgency of environmental challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and pollution has intensified the need for sustainable consumption and production practices across societies. Waste reduction is one of the most important aspects of sustainability since it minimises material consumption, reduces emissions from production and disposal, and conserves natural resources, all of which directly address the underlying causes of environmental degradation. Young people nowadays are also fully engrossed in digital ecosystems, with social media influencing their everyday decision-making, identities, beliefs, and interpersonal connections. This confluence of youth, digital participation, and environmental urgency offers a strong justification for investigating how social media might serve as a useful tool for encouraging trash reduction. Waste reduction is one of the most important aspects of sustainability because it minimises material consumption, reduces emissions from production and disposal, and conserves natural resources—all of which directly address the underlying causes of environmental degradation. Simultaneously, today's youth are engrossed in digital environments, with social media influencing their identities, morals, interpersonal connections, and everyday choices. This confluence of youth, digital involvement, and environmental urgency offers a strong justification for investigating social media's potential as a useful tool for encouraging waste reduction.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the impact of social media usage and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles among youth.
- To review the role of social media in encouraging waste reduction practices such as recycling, reuse, minimalism, and zero-waste lifestyles among youth.
- To suggest directions for future research, policy, and practices for effectively using social media as a tool for promoting sustainable waste management among youth.

Literature Review

Influence of Social Media Platforms on Public Awareness

The internet is increasingly being utilised to promote environmental awareness since it allows individuals to comment and contribute rapidly and because of its vast reach and accessibility. Younger generations are becoming more avid users of new media channels. Youths today are tremendously connected to global/local concerns through the internet, especially on Facebook and Twitter. WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter are examples of social networking platforms

that have significantly broadened our horizons in terms of global affairs and improved international understanding. Facebook alone has a slew of pages dedicated to environmental awareness and conservation. As a communication tool, new media have become increasingly trendy among various kinds of professions, including professors, teachers, learners, and the general public.

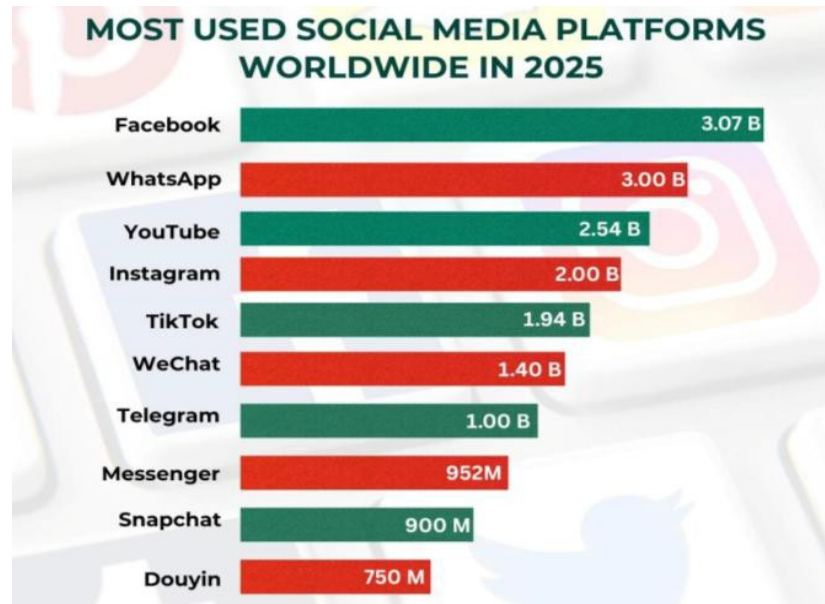


Fig-2 . Most used social media platforms in India in 2025

Source: DataReportal

To support the government's Swachh Bharat drive, local entrepreneurs have created several free apps that help users keep their cities and towns clean across various parts of the country. People from all walks of life have stepped up to join the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (National Cleanliness Campaign). They are raising awareness through social media by shooting photos and videos of places afflicted by inadequate sanitation and uploading them to various social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, where they are shared with a large number of people.

Influence and Exposure Through Social Media on Youth

Some social media awareness campaigns have gone viral and reached millions of youths. With a rapidly growing population and increasing urbanisation, waste management has become a critical challenge for India. Social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter are now essential in influencing public opinion, particularly among young people.

These websites are useful tools for education and advocacy, not just for entertainment. One of their key roles is to educate youth about sustainable lifestyles. When influencers, environmental activists, and even ordinary people share content about eco-friendly practices, ethical fashion, and zero-waste living, complex environmental issues become more approachable and realistic. Digital media promotes transparency through brand accountability and user reviews. Social media users frequently uncover greenwashing, discuss their experiences with products and services, and highlight businesses that genuinely adhere to ethical and environmental standards.

Influencers and Content Creators' Roles

Influencers have a significant impact on how young people behave, especially when it comes to promoting environmentally friendly shopping. Because of their wide audience and relatable content, several eco-conscious creators have emerged as significant figures in promoting environmental stewardship. By encouraging minimalism and ethical consumption, these influencers persuade their followers to choose quality over quantity and to reevaluate their purchasing habits. Influencers frequently collaborate with eco-friendly companies to promote ethical goods. They connect their viewers to eco-friendly substitutes like reusable items, organic skincare products, or ethically made clothes through sponsored content and frank evaluations. Because their followers frequently regard them as genuine and reliable, their recommendations are significant. Their programming, which includes zero-waste shopping recommendations and composting instructions, encourages young people to take modest but significant steps toward sustainability.

Table No. 1: Major Government Initiatives and Policies for Waste Management in India (2014- 2018)

Initiative / Policy	Year of Launch	Primary Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Swachh Bharat Mission	2014	To achieve universal sanitation coverage, eliminate open defecation, and improve cleanliness standards across urban and rural India.	Construction of household and community toilets, behavioural change through awareness campaigns, source segregation of waste, and adoption of scientific waste processing technologies.
Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules	2016	To establish a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for the management of municipal solid waste.	Defined responsibilities for waste generators, local bodies, and waste processors; mandatory segregation into biodegradable, recyclable, and inert waste; emphasis on scientific treatment and disposal.
Plastic Waste Management Rules	2016 (Amended in 2022)	To minimize plastic pollution and promote responsible plastic production, use, and disposal.	Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), regulation of plastic packaging, recycling targets, and a nationwide ban on identified single-use plastic items.
Waste-to-	Ongoing	To reduce landfill	Generation of electricity,

Initiative / Policy	Year of Launch	Primary Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Energy (WTE) Projects	(Policy support post 2015)	dependency by converting waste into usable forms of energy	bio-CNG, and compost from municipal solid waste using advanced waste processing technologies.
GOBAR-Dhan Scheme	2018	To promote the conversion of organic waste into wealth-generating resources such as biogas and organic manure.	Utilisation of cattle dung, agricultural residues, and biodegradable waste; establishment of biogas and bio-CNG plants in rural areas.

The Solid Waste Management

The pace at which municipal solid trash is generated in developing nations has significantly increased due to factors such as population growth, economic expansion, fast urbanisation, and improvements in community living standards (Minghua et al., 2009). Municipalities, which are often responsible for managing garbage in urban areas, face the difficulty of offering residents an efficient and successful system. However, they frequently deal with issues that the local authority is unable to handle (Sujauddin et al., 2008), mostly because of a lack of funding, structure, complexity, and multidimensionality of the System (Burntley, 2007).

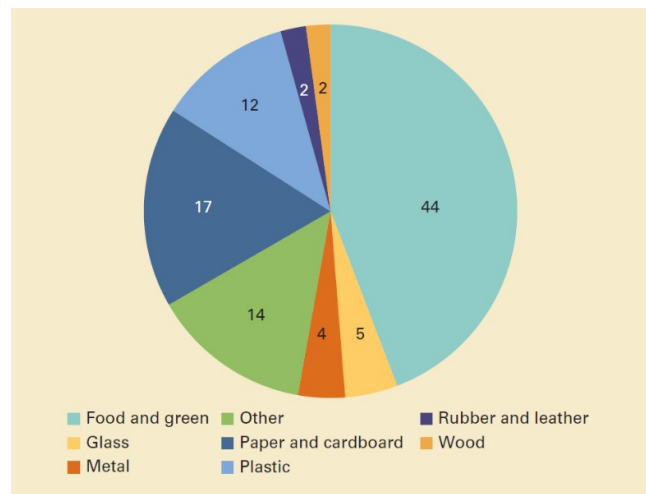


Fig. 3- Global waste composition (per cent)

Source- https://datatopics.worldbank.org/what-a-waste/img/v2_global_waste_composition.png

The graphical distribution in Fig. 3 of waste materials provides important insights into the nature of solid waste generation. The chart reveals that food and green waste form the largest component of the total waste stream, contributing 44%. This predominant percentage shows that a sizable amount of waste comes from biodegradable sources such as garden waste, vegetable peels, and kitchen leftovers. The large percentage of organic waste emphasises the potential of bio-waste treatment and composting as efficient waste reduction techniques. Paper and cardboard make up 17% of all waste, making them the second-largest category. This

illustrates how commonplace paper-based materials are in everyday tasks, such as packing. Paper and cardboard make up the second-largest group, accounting for 17% of all garbage. This

illustrates how paper-based products are widely used in everyday tasks like packing, instruction, and communication. Because cardboard and paper are recyclable, their high presence in the waste stream indicates that better segregation techniques could greatly increase recycling results.

Twelve per cent of all waste is made up of plastic waste. Plastic is still an issue for the environment because of its persistence and low biodegradability, even if it is smaller than organic and paper waste. Significant amounts of plastic highlight the need for a shift in behaviour, a decrease in reliance on single-use plastics, and a greater understanding of sustainable alternatives. The prevalence of mixed or miscellaneous goods that are frequently challenging to categorise or recycle is indicated by the category of other waste materials, which accounts for 14% of the total. This section highlights the need for improved waste management education and illustrates inefficiencies in garbage sorting at the source. Glass waste (5%) and metal waste (4%) have smaller percentages. Despite making up a smaller portion of the overall volume, these materials have a high recycling value and, with proper collection and processing, can be successfully reintegrated into production cycles. Wood (2%) and rubber and leather (2%) are the least prevalent waste categories, indicating either low production or restricted use of these materials in the waste stream under observation. Overall, the distribution shows that recyclable and biodegradable materials account for the majority of trash production, suggesting significant opportunity for waste reduction through recycling, composting, and better sorting techniques. The results highlight how crucial it is to implement sustainable waste management strategies at the home and community levels to reduce environmental effects and promote the ideas of the circular economy.

Methods of Solid Waste Management

Solid waste management involves collecting rubbish from specific neighbourhood locations and transporting it in vans to tipping locations. After that, each sort of material is separated, processed, and disposed of. Solids may be taken for landfill disposal, while toxic materials may be burned, treated, recycled, and finally disposed of. Danbuzu (2011) discusses several methods of disposing of waste and divides them into four groups: burial, recycling, controlled tipping, and burning.

Burial Method- This method involves the metaphorical burial of waste, as well as the burying of unwanted objects such as broken bottles, potsherds, or hygienic landfill composting.

This practice has a negative effect on human health. For example, nobody wants a rubbish burial site close by because of their detrimental effects. After organic material is buried, leachate may be created, which often contaminates boreholes, wells, and aquifers. The hole excavated on the property will not yield any transportable water for human consumption. It is well known that when organic material is buried, heat is produced, which results in the creation of biogas, or methane.

Burning Method - The average Nigerian produces 0.45 grams of garbage each day, according to some estimates. The previously mentioned waste disposal standards have an impact on the

waste vanes' content and quality. The primary component is organic matter, which accounts for 60–80% of the total waste. Although incineration is a common method of disposing of waste, it has disadvantages since it is merely a means to an end rather than the end in and of itself. By setting it on fire, the garbage gets burned. Fire is produced when low heat and oxygen are mixed.

Controlled Tipping (Sanitary Landfill)- By dispersing solid waste in thin layers, compacting it to the lowest particle volume feasible, and covering it with soil every working day, sanitary landfills are made to dispose of solid waste on land in a way that protects the environment. A sanitary landfill is the most efficient way to dispose of waste because it leaves no residue and transforms a wasted piece of land into something useful.

Recycling method-Other pulverisation, composting, and incineration byproducts may be deemed recycled or salvaged if they are utilised for one or more uses. The components that have a market and are found in large enough amounts in the waste to justify their separation are the ones that are more recoverable. Ferrous metals, aluminium, paper, cardboard, plastic, glass, and other nonferrous metals have all been recovered from solid waste. Among the companies that use waste are paper mills, cardboard factories, steel rolling mills, aluminium factories, and plastic factories.

Barriers and Challenges

Although there are many advantages to using sustainable waste management techniques, there are also a number of obstacles and difficulties in their general acceptance. The shift to more sustainable waste management methods may be hampered by a lack of infrastructure, financial limitations, social opposition, etc. Furthermore, several studies have shown that the complexity of waste streams and the need for stakeholder cooperation pose significant obstacles. Environmental conservation is greatly impacted by sustainable waste management techniques, which can be greatly impacted by a number of challenges. Numerous studies highlight these difficulties and obstacles, illuminating the constraints and complexities encountered by various sustainable waste management programs.

Lack of Infrastructure: Well-developed and efficient infrastructure is necessary for composting plants, recycling facilities, waste-to-energy facilities, and other sustainable waste management solutions. Regrettably, the main barrier to the successful implementation of sustainable waste management strategies is usually the lack of such infrastructure.

Financial limitations: According to a number of studies, adopting sustainable waste management practices requires significant upfront expenditures. This financial challenge is one of the barriers to the adoption of ecologically friendly waste management systems. **Social opposition and behaviour change:** Another major obstacle to altering the disposal of waste is motivating individuals and different communities to embrace sustainable techniques. A recent study has highlighted the need to remove behavioural obstacles and increase knowledge in order to encourage positive changes.

Inadequate Regulation and Enforcement: Inadequate waste management regulations or slack enforcement can lead to improper garbage disposal and illegal dumping. It has been discovered that establishing and upholding strict waste management laws is essential to promoting sustainable practices.

Limited Market Demand for Recycled Products: One of the main reasons recycling is successful is the market's desire for recycled materials. Research indicates that promoting the use of recycled products and raising customer demand are crucial for sustainable waste management.

Technological Restrictions: In certain places, a lack of access to state-of-the-art waste management technologies may hinder the adoption of more sustainable practices. Research shows that to overcome these limitations; technological developments are essential.

Myths and Misconceptions: Advancement may be hampered by false information or misconceptions about waste management strategies. Educating the public about the benefits of sustainable alternatives and the detrimental effects improper rubbish disposal have on the environment is necessary to promote behavioural change.

Lack of Public Education and Awareness: People who are unaware of the importance of sustainable waste management practices may become apathetic or indifferent. Studies underscore the significance of educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns in promoting sustainable waste management. Despite these challenges, proactive measures by governments, businesses, communities, and individuals can help develop sustainable waste management practices. By addressing these problems, society can significantly increase waste management's contribution to environmental protection and a more sustainable future.

Social Media Campaigns Targeting Plastic Waste Reduction

Social media has emerged as a powerful catalyst for young people to transform environmental consciousness into sustainable action. In 2024, Ananda Jirasit carried out the research titled "The Impact of Social Media Campaigns on Reducing Plastic Waste in Thailand's Coastal Areas." In order to lessen plastic waste in Thailand's coastal regions, the study concentrated on how social media campaigns impact public attitudes and behaviour. This systematic study examines how social media has altered public perceptions about plastic pollution and its consequences on the environment by comparing behaviour and awareness before and after major campaigns. Millions of tourists go to beaches like those in Phuket, Pattaya, Krabi, and other coastal areas each year, creating a major problem with plastic waste. In recent years, social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Instagram Threads, and Twitter X have emerged as vital resources for environmental campaigning due to their ability to increase awareness, engage young people, spur action, and influence change. Significant amounts of plastic garbage wind up in the ocean, aggravating environmental degradation and posing a serious threat to marine life because the waste generated through these locations often surpasses the capacity of local waste treatment systems. When used properly, it can significantly contribute to sustainable development and environmental conservation. These campaigns have not only raised awareness but also actively pushed people to adopt more eco-friendly practices, which has led to significant reductions in single-use plastics, an increase in participation in recycling programs, and an increase in neighbourhood-based cleanup efforts. One of the most prominent trends is the public's declining usage of single-use plastics. Campaigns like #NoMorePlastic and #BeatPlasticPollution encourage people to make small, manageable changes to reduce their plastic footprint. Because of this, an increasing number of people are using these alternatives in their daily lives, which is contributing to a more substantial change

in the direction of sustainability. Recycling habits have also improved as a result of social media activism.

Conclusions

The review's conclusions show that social media has a big, multifaceted impact on young people's sustainable living choices, especially when it comes to waste reduction. Young people were consistently shown to be active consumers and distributors of environmental information on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X (Twitter), and new short-video apps across the evaluated literature. It has been discovered that exposure to sustainability related content on these platforms increases environmental consciousness, concern, and individual accountability, particularly with regard to waste reduction, recycling, and decreased plastic usage.

The effectiveness of interactive and visual content in conveying waste-related information is one of the review's most notable findings. It has been demonstrated that platforms that prioritize graphics and videos can make difficult environmental issues easier for non-experts to understand. Higher levels of comprehension and engagement were shown by young people who often came across postings, reels, and brief videos about recycling, composting, zero waste lifestyles, and waste segregation. This lends credence to the idea that social media-based informal learning enhances formal environmental education by converting abstract sustainability objectives into practical, everyday actions.

The review also emphasises how online communities, peer networks, and influencers help normalise sustainable habits. By portraying trash reduction as socially desirable and attainable, influencers who support ethical consumption, minimalism, and plastic-free alternatives have been shown to have a major impact on young people's views. Positive social norms surrounding waste reduction were further reinforced by peer interactions, such as discussing individual sustainability journeys or taking part in online challenges. Individual activities become collective movements as a result of these digital contacts.

The connection between social media marketing and behavioural change is another important finding. Initiatives to reduce plastic waste, cleanliness campaigns, and recycling programs showed quantifiable increases in public involvement. Youth were encouraged to adopt reusable products, steer clear of single-use plastics, and take part in community cleanup events by hashtag-based campaigns and user-generated content. Social media has been shown to effectively support national initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission in India by allowing users to share local success stories, report sanitation issues, and encourage civic duty.

The review's analysis of national and international trash data further highlights the significance of these conclusions. The results highlight the potential of youth-led waste reduction initiatives, with organic waste accounting for the largest share of worldwide waste composition, followed by paper, plastic, and other recyclable materials. Young consumers' adoption of sustainable consumption behaviours was linked to increased awareness of waste hierarchy concepts, such as prevention, reuse, and recycling.

The analysis also identifies differences in waste management strategies across developed and developing regions. Informal recycling industries are vital but often overlooked in poor nations. It was discovered that social media platforms helped close the gap between policy frameworks

and practical applications by giving these unofficial players attention. This visibility promotes inclusive approaches to sustainable waste management and helps waste pickers gain more public prominence. Overall, the findings imply that social media serves as a catalyst for behavioural change in addition to serving as a route for information. Social media greatly aids in encouraging waste reduction and sustainable lifestyles among young people by influencing attitudes, upholding social standards, and facilitating group participation.

Suggestions

Based on the review's findings, a number of recommendations can be made to improve social media's ability to encourage young people to lead sustainable lifestyles and reduce waste. First, creating platform-specific sustainable content needs more attention. Policymakers, educators, and environmental organisations should prioritise short films, infographics, and interactive formats that clearly illustrate waste reduction techniques like composting, reuse, and source segregation because visual-centric platforms have proven very effective. Long-term engagement and comprehension can be enhanced by simplifying technical material without sacrificing accuracy.

Second, it is important to actively promote partnerships with social media influencers. Influencers who are already well-known among young people can serve as ambassadors for sustainability by incorporating messages about waste reduction into their frequent posts.

Nonetheless, sincerity ought to take precedence over marketing messaging. Influencers who truly engage in sustainable practices are more likely to inspire imitation and trust. Transparent collaborations between digital producers and environmental organisations can help prevent misinformation and ensure adherence to sustainability objectives.

Third, educational establishments want to incorporate social media-based learning into their environmental education initiatives. Universities and colleges can encourage students to take part in digital campaigns, produce sustainability-focused content, and evaluate online environmental narratives. This strategy would empower young people to become active contributors rather than passive consumers of sustainability information, while also improving digital literacy.

Fourth, government organisations ought to use social media much more to promote waste management programs and policies. Interactive reporting systems, feedback channels, and acknowledging citizen participation are ways to improve current initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission. Showcasing regional achievements and neighbourhood-based projects can encourage greater involvement and a sense of shared accountability. To promote inclusive and socially equitable sustainability communication, special attention should be paid to elevating the voices of informal trash workers.

Fifth, to better understand the long-term behavioural effects of social media exposure, future research should use multidisciplinary and mixed-method approaches. Even while current research shows that pro-environmental behaviour and internet participation are positively correlated, further long-term studies are required to determine whether these behaviours persist over time. Finding region-specific tactics for successful digital sustainability communication would also be aided by comparative research across various cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

Sixth, algorithmic visibility and specialised features should motivate platform developers to assist sustainability projects. The beneficial effects of social media ecosystems on the environment can be increased by promoting reliable environmental material, limiting the dissemination of false information, and offering resources for community mobilisation. Features like community forums, challenges, or sustainability badges could encourage youth involvement even further.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge young people as co-creators of long-lasting change. Social media can become an active platform for environmental action by promoting peer-to-peer learning, digital storytelling, and grassroots involvement. Social media may significantly contribute to the advancement of waste reduction and sustainable development objectives by coordinating digital interaction with practical activities.

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