Virtual And Real: An Examination Of India's Gen Z Political Consciousness, Participation And Perception In The Digital Age

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Abstract

The growing prominence of India's Generation Z marks a significant shift in the landscape of political engagement, reshaping how young citizens interpret, debate and engage with political issues. The paper titled, "Virtual and Real: An Examination of India's Gen Z Political Consciousness, Participation and Perception in the Digital Age", explores the political consciousness, participation and perception of India's Gen Z. The data is collected from 205 participants, comprising students across various educational institutions as well as working professionals of India through self-administered survey questionnaire. Quantitative research methodology is used to analyse the data. The findings suggest that while Gen Z are politically conscious and have high interest in politics, their political engagement often remains confined to virtual environment. Their online as well as offline political participation is limited. They have certain kind of perception towards politics. It follows that India's Gen Z represents a digitally aware yet institutionally detached generation. The democratic process will only be strengthened if online interest and activity can be transformed into consistent, real-world civic participation. This research highlights the need to strengthen Gen Z- driven democratic participation in the digital age.

Keywords: Generation Z, Political Consciousness, Political Participation, Political Perception, Digital Native

INTRODUCTION

The political consciousness and participation of Generation Z is crucial indicator of democratic consolidation and political development in contemporary India. Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is the first generation to grow completely in the digital age and hence are formally known as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). Their perception is largely influenced by digital content where they consume information, engage in public discourse and participate in activism through social media platforms. They differ from their previous generations in digital political socialisation who were significantly influenced by print media, television and political rallies. The political opinion of Gen Z is increasingly shaped by viral memes, influencer commentaries, fake news, algorithm driven content and narratives. Additionally, the podcast culture deeply influences Gen Z and is a tool used extensively by political leaders to engage with youth voters and polarize them. According to Election Commission of India (An ATLAS-2024), the total percentage of electors across India who were aged between 18-29 years was 22.78%.

India's political landscape presents a unique and compelling study for examining Gen Z's political consciousness, participation and perception. Political consciousness among youth is shaped by issue-oriented activism rather than aligning strictly with a static factor. Gen Z is highly focussed on climate

change, social justice, gender equality, economic inequality and corruption- related activism. Additionally, their political consciousness is highly globalised where they learn from worldwide events and takes inspiration. Gen Z show low interest in participative politics, viewing it as a corrupt institution. This factor equally contributes to develop political perception, which is complex and multi-faceted and are shaped by number of factors. These factors include criminalization of politics, underrepresentation of youth, dynastic politics and so on. Digital platforms play dual role acting as a tool for shaping youth perception and at the same time, is a source of distrust among them.

A democratic civilisation requires political consciousness (Tomy et al.2022). Consequently, consciousness develops critical thinking about various policies, initiatives and actions of the government and issues prevailing in society, which in turn makes youth aware. The awareness leads to political engagement and participation, which is a key characteristic for the success of democracy. India has seen many examples of students protest for unemployment and fair conduct of examination and they face nothing more than curfew, arrest and police brutality. Such instances create fear among youth to actively participate and as a result, their perception also changes. They may turn out to be political apathy, thus creating challenge for democracy. Democracy will strengthen only when each and every citizen is given the right to express their dissent. India with huge youth population brings new and fresh perspective and innovation necessary for development of the society and add values to the democracy by making it more powerful and inclusive.

Social media plays an important role in shaping Gen Z's ideology and perception of political discourse (Sam et al.2024). The world has seen many examples of how young people's activism, channelled through digital tools, can bring about transformative results. At the micro level, social media can alter an individual's view, while at the macro level, it has the potential to overthrow the government (Jishnu & Shamala, 2024). The Arab Spring of 2010-11 serves as a landmark example, where digital platforms were used by young citizens to organise meetings and protests, communicate effectively across borders and circumnavigate the state-controlled media. In countries like Tunisia and Egypt, the amplified voices through digital platforms incited public gatherings and protests that had major political consequences. A similar trajectory is evident in South Asia where the 2025 protests in Nepal was driven by Gen Z, responding to political instability, corruption and perceived erosion of democratic accountability. It was noteworthy that the protest culminated into outcomes like government resignation. Gen Z's civic engagement was particularly notable for being digitally active, as they used social media platforms to rapidly organize protests and spread information to fuel nationwide movements. The study on Gen Z's political consciousness, participation and perception in the digital age has received less attention in India. This study attempts to explore their political consciousness, virtual and real-time participation and their perception about politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vignesh & Genila (2025): This study examines Gen Z voters' political perspectives in Tamil Nadu. One of its research objectives is to understand Gen Z's perspectives on politics & political parties in Tamil Nadu. It shows Gen Z's awareness of politics as well as the advertisement of politics. The study also highlights that despite the amplified voices of Gen Z through social media; their influence is limited due to institutional mechanism. Published in *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT),* this research comes up with understanding of changing Gen Z's political behaviour in the digital era in Tamil Nadu.

Alifatunnisa et al. (2024): This study examines the political communication strategies in the digital era as well as the social media platforms to attract Generation Z voters. The findings show that these strategies are successful in attracting Gen Z's attention. The effective visual content, use of humour in political content and access to political information influence their engagement with politics. It also highlights the challenges in assessing information such as fake news and critical thinking skills. Published in *Edunity: Social and Educational Studies*, it emphasizes on the role of political communication strategies that utilize social media to be effective tool to attract Gen Z.

Barati (2023): The study examines the effect of casual social media use in online political participation, offline political participation and probability of voting among young adults. It also explores whether online political participation affects young adults' engagement in offline political activities. The result shows significant effect on online political participation, negligible effect on offline political participation and voting behaviour. It also shows an indirect effect on offline political activities through online political

participation. Published in *eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government,* the findings challenge the slacktivism in youth.

Fakeye (2023): The study examines how the social media plays a role in impacting the level of political enlightenment in terms of political awareness of youth in Ilaro, a town in Nigeria. The results show that youths in the town are actively engaged in commenting on social media platforms and are informed on the major topics about the politics of the land and nation both online and offline. Published in *International Journal of Women and Technical Education and Employment,* the study recommends that there should be responsible use of social media by the youth.

Robin et al. (2022): This study focusses on Gen Z's perspective on politics in Indonesia. The study aims to explore Gen Z's interest in politics, their views on political parties and the need for political education. Published in *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik (JISIP),* the paper comes up with three interesting findings: Gen Z have high interest in politics, but they are uninformed and thus, they lack active political participation. Secondly, they see political parties as a group with some hidden agenda. Thirdly, they desire for political education to think more critically.

Tomy et al. (2022): This study focusses on studying the factors involved in political awareness among youngsters in politics. It reveals that youth have high level of political awareness and high political interest, yet they do not significantly contribute to politics. They criticize the government for various problems like failing to maintain law and order, scarcity and job losses. Published in *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology,* the paper also highlights the role of social media for political activities, leading to increase in political awareness as well as political participation.

Mir (2022): The study investigates the participation of Indian students in politics on social media. It also examines whether social media plays an important role in promoting offline political participation and political awareness among students. The study reveals that majority of students use social media for political content and reading news update, which means political awareness could be increased by social media. Over one-third of the participants believed that offline political participation is influenced by social media. Published in *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research,* the study also discloses that social media has not evolved completely as a platform for political discussion among students in India.

Buzzetto-Hollywood et al. (2021): The study examines the use of social media, cultural and political awareness, civic engagement, prioritization of issues and social activism of Gen Z students. The purpose is to examine the expectations and behaviours of Gen Z students in the mid- Atlantic United States. The findings suggest that Gen Z students are heavy users of multiple social media. They have consciousness about current and political events, use social media for getting news and information and fairly engage in social activism.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The following are the main objectives of the research:

1. To assess the political consciousness of India's Generation Z.
2. To examine the online and offline political participation of India's Generation Z.
3. To analyse the political perception of India's Generation Z.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted using quantitative research methodology to examine the political consciousness, participation and perception of India's Generation Z. It uses only primary data sources. A self-administered survey questionnaire is used to gather primary data from participants. The questionnaire consists of twenty close-ended questions and one open-ended question to examine the objectives of the research with deeper insights. The close-ended questions consist of single choice and multi-choice questions. The sample for the study consists of 205 participants who are mainly students from various educational institutions and working professionals from India. The age group is 18-28 years. The participants are from rural, urban and semi-urban areas of India. The data was collected through Google

form, which was shared to the participants using social media platforms. Ethical consideration such as maintaining confidentiality is taken into account for the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data was collected through structured questionnaire administered online. The data was analysed and an appropriate diagrammatic representation of results was prepared for easy understanding of the responses. A total of twenty one questions were selected and critically analysed for the study. Students from various educational institutions as well as working professionals from India participated in the study. The age group of the respondents for the study was taken from 18-28 years. The data represents that a significant portion (73.7%) of respondents fall within the age range of 21-23. The majority of respondents (65.9%) belong from post-graduation background, while other respondents are undergraduate students (25.9%), working professionals (3.9%) and so on. 57.1% of the total respondents are male, 42% are female and 1% preferred not to reveal their gender. The respondents belong to rural (34.1%), semi-urban (22.9%) and urban (42.9%) region. Below is the detailed analysis of the study:
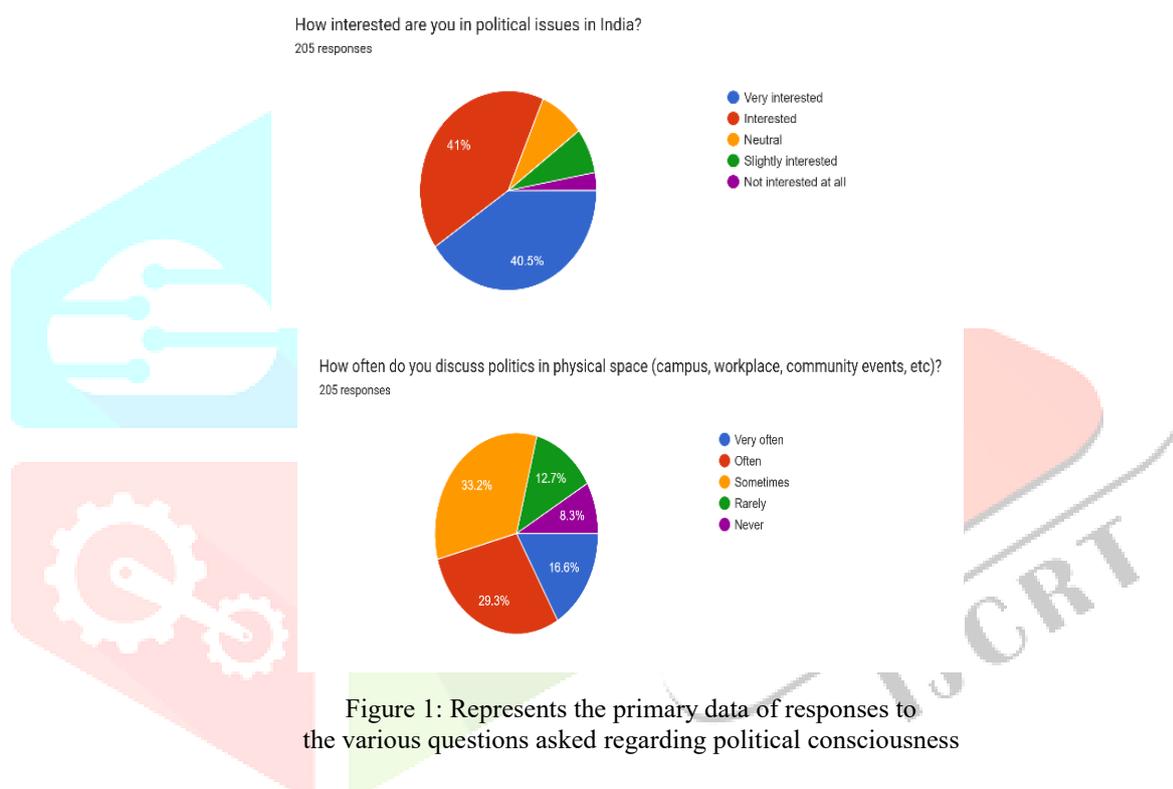

Figure 1: Represents the primary data of responses to the various questions asked regarding political consciousness

Figure 1 represents the responses of the various questions asked related to political consciousness of India's Gen Z. 81.5% of the respondents agree that they are interested in political issues, while a small percentage (2.9%) are not interested at all. The data also shows that politics is discussed either often or very often (45.9%) and sometimes (33.2%) in physical spaces like campus, workplace, community events, etc. With a significant number of respondents showing interest in political issues and having discussions at physical places, it can be inferred that they have adequate political consciousness among them. Despite high interest in politics, the political discussion among Gen Z is not as much as it is supposed to be.
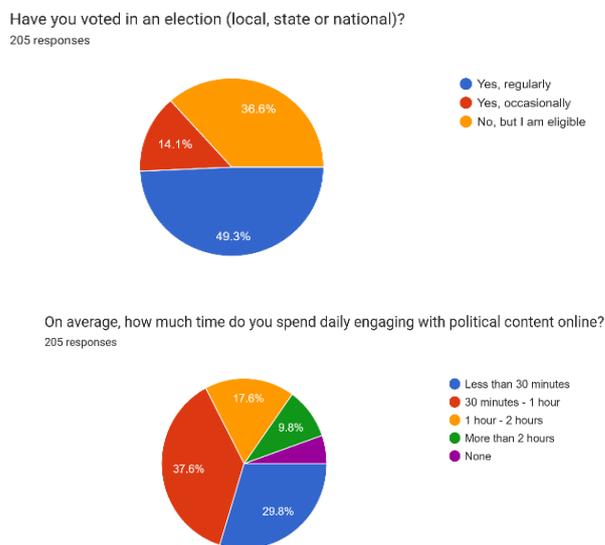
Figure 2: Represents the primary data of responses to
the various questions asked regarding political participation

Figure 2 represents the responses of the various questions asked related to political participation of India's Gen Z. 49.3% of the respondents cast their vote regularly in local, state or national elections which demonstrates they have high degree of trust in political institutions and believes their participation is meaningful and their action can influence the political process. 36.6% are eligible but have not casted their vote. This civic disengagement of non-voters plays a significant role in creating crucial challenges to the democratic consolidation. 14.1% cast their vote occasionally which shows they still believe in the political process and their participation can bring positive outcomes.

The data reveals that 55.2% of the total respondents spend thirty minutes to two hours daily engaging with political content online that is aligned with the popular assumption that 'digital natives' (Gen Z) are automatically engaged with screen. Also, 9.8% of respondents spend more than two hours daily, while 5.4% do not spend any time on it. Engaging with political content online shows Gen Z's interest in politics.
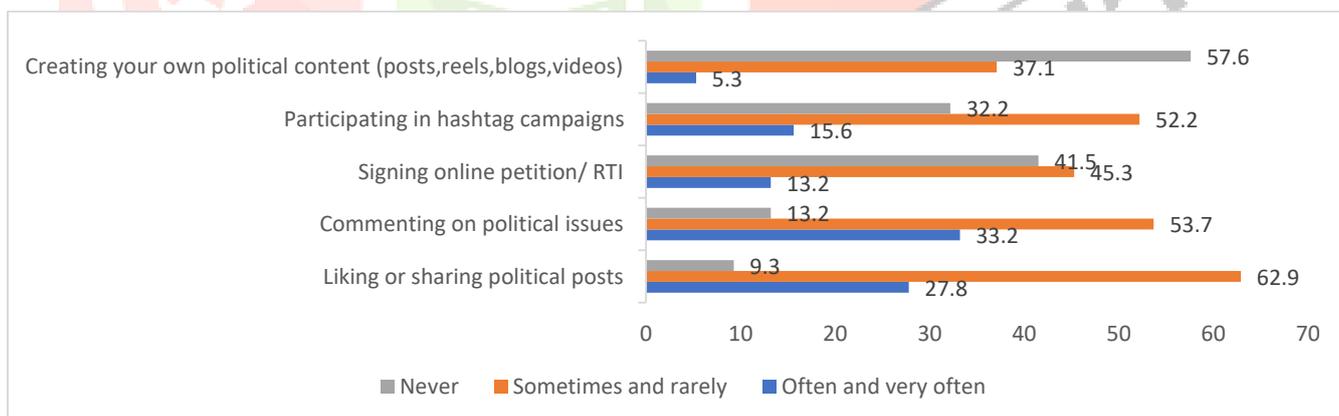

Figure 3: Represents the primary data of responses (in %) to
the various questions asked regarding online political participation

Figure 3 shows another set of results for online political participation, which is assessed based on five criteria. 27.8% of the respondents tend to like or share political posts often, while 9.3% have never done it. 33.2% tend to comment on political issues, while 13.2% have never commented. The data reveals that only 13.2% of the respondents have participated in signing online petitions or RTI and 41.5% have never done so. Moreover, only 15.6% have participated in hashtag campaigns, while 32.2 have never participated. 5.3% are involved in creating their own political content like posts, reels, blogs and videos, while 57.6% have never shown interest in doing so. The above data shows that even after spending a fair bit of their screen time on political contents and having high political interest, Zen Z's online political participation is limited. They are more engaged in liking, sharing and commenting on political posts, while

they rarely participate in signing online petitions or RTI, hashtag campaigns and creating their own political contents.
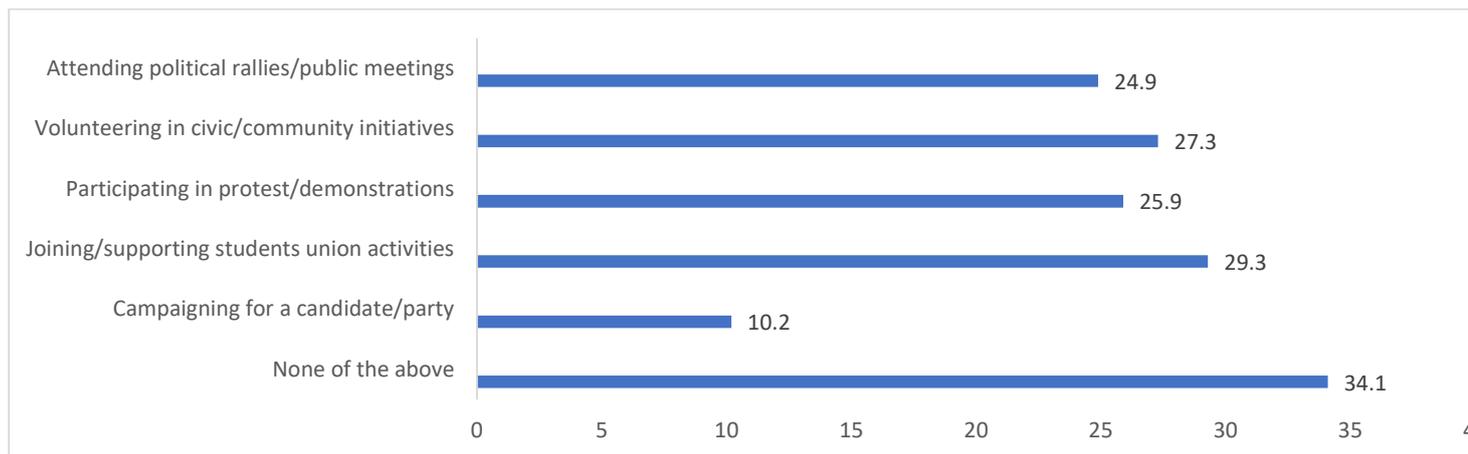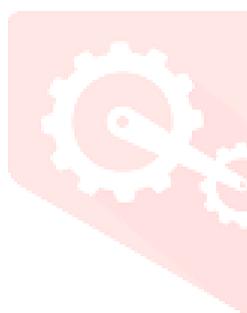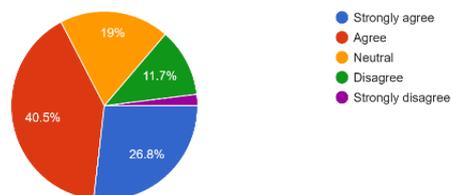

Figure 4: Represents the primary data of responses (in %) to
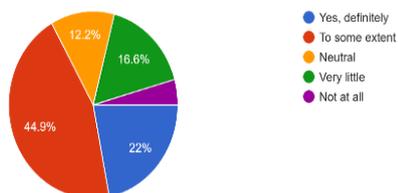the various questions asked regarding offline political participation

Figure 4 represents the responses of another set of questions asked related to Gen Z's offline political participation. The respondents were given the choice to select all that applied. 24.9% of the respondents have attended political rallies or public meetings, 27.3% have volunteered in civic or community initiatives, 25.9% have participated in protests and demonstrations, 29.3% have joined or supported student union activities, 10.2% have campaigned for a candidate or party and 34.1% of the respondents have not participated in any of these activities. The above data clearly reflects that the maximum number of respondents have not participated to any of the given offline political activities. The respondents show interest in student union activities to some extent, while there is less real time participation in other offline activities with the least participation in campaigning for a candidate or party.
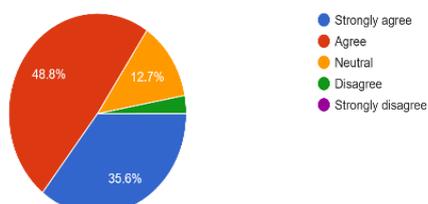
Do you agree that political agenda-based reels and YouTube shorts content significantly influence your political engagement?
205 responses

Legend:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
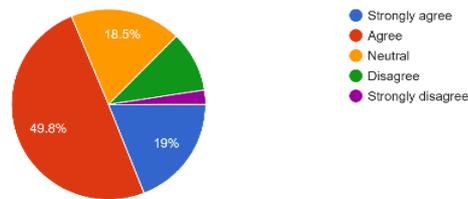- Strongly disagree

(Pie chart values: 49.8%, 18.5%, 19%)

Figure 5: Represents the primary data of responses to
the various questions asked regarding political perception

Figure 5 shows the data of responses regarding political perception of Gen Z. 67.3% of the respondents believe that their individual actions such as discussion, voting or awareness campaign can make a difference in politics. 84.4% believes that digital participation increases awareness of political issues among youth. 44.9% believes that their online political participation has an influence to some extent on actual decision making or policy change. 68.8% of the respondents agree that political agenda-based reels and YouTube shorts content significantly influence their political engagement. The result indicates that Gen Z's political engagement is 'pseudo political engagement' where their perception is shaped by political agenda-based contents and as result, they believe their political awareness is increased due to digital participation. Despite a significant number of respondents having faith in their individual actions making a difference in politics, they are not assured of their online political participation to influence actual decision making or policy change. Extrinsic factors have a role to play in shaping of political perception of Gen Z.

DISCUSSION

One's political state of mind is referred to as political consciousness (Tomy et al. 2022). Gen Z are aware of political issues, understand existing political realities and often tend to discuss concerns regarding politics in campus, workplace, community events and so on. They are found to be politically self-aware as they show high interest in politics. Gen Z's political consciousness is not just limited to their interest and discussions, rather they are sensible to various issues concerning them the most such as education and unemployment, corruption, environmental concerns, economic inequality, freedom of expression and gender inequality. This can directly impact their political consciousness and in turn, will promote lack of distrust in political system. Further, it may either result in political apathy or spark radical ideas to counter these issues. The massive students protest after the Telangana government's announcement for its plan to auction some 400 acres of forested land adjacent to the University of Hyderabad showcases an excellent example of consciousness, which led to participation in the form of protests and rallies. The Supreme Court directed the Telangana government to stop its alarming deforestation activities in the region.

Political participation is an essential part of modern democracies as it enables citizens to hold their governments accountable (Dahl, 1973). The online as well as offline political participation of Gen Z is inadequate, but simultaneously, their online participation is more than the offline participation. One prominent example is the youth's voice raised for Staff Selection Commission mismanagement with aspirants and teachers coming together at Jantar Mantar under a 'Delhi Chalo' call to demand accountability and reform in the process. Meanwhile, social media platforms saw huge support for the protestors with hashtags like #SSCMisManagement trending on X. Gen Z have potential to bring the change, but their participation is limited. The major barriers preventing Generation Z from actively participating in politics are lack of trust in political system, busy academic and career schedule, lack of awareness, fear of backlash or criticism, dynastic politics, influence of money and power, media bias and misinformation, weak youth policy platforms, socio-economic and structural barriers. Given that these barriers are removed, there might be a good chance for effective political participation of Gen Z.

Political perception is the general understanding of how an individual think, interpret and process the political ideology, institution, political events and policies. The perceptions greatly impact their involvement in active politics. The study revealed that Gen Z have faith in their individual actions for making a difference in politics and their digital participation increases awareness of political issues among

them. More than half of the participants feel that their online political participation has less influence on actual decision-making or policy change. The politics which is fed to Zen Z through social media is often selective, distorted and propagandist. Their understanding depends upon whether they can differentiate propaganda from the politics. Gen Z are keen to bring changes in Indian politics. They want transparency, accountability, digital governance, inclusive politics, freedom of expression, greater political awareness, shift from identity politics to issue-based politics, young minds to lead from the front both as voters and policy influencers and reservation of seats for youth in the parliament.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to examine the political consciousness, participation and perception of Generation Z in India. The findings indicate that Gen Z are not politically disinterested. They have discussions regarding politics at physical places. This shows they are aware of the political events happening around them. When it comes to virtual and real-time participation, their participation is not as much as expected. Gen Z criticize the government for failing to prevent law and order, corruption, job scarcity, lack of quality education and a variety of other problems, but they do not sufficiently contribute to politics. Digital platforms have brought a revolution which has resulted into easy access of information and political contents. The findings also illustrate that Gen Z are involved in liking, sharing and commenting on the political contents which are created by others, but they have less involvement in creating their own contents such as posts, reels, blogs and videos. It indicates that their perception is largely shaped by extrinsic factors.

Gen Z are fundamentally the new force having amplified voices and power which can directly impact the direction of social challenges to give it an accountable and legitimate solution. They have technological and innovative ideas for the future which is yet to be identified by the leaders and government. Gen Z are the future of the country. Their engagement will produce visionary and able leaders in the future. The study has limitation of sample, which is smaller in size. The sample is convenient and is collected from larger geographical area of India. The result of this research is helpful to understand the actual political-oriented behaviour of Gen Z. It is important for Gen Z to be more active in politics, increasing their political engagement and have their own perception towards political scenario. It will bring positive outcomes by addressing various issues and make government accountable. Further research in this area can be done to examine the factors responsible for limited political participation of Generation Z.

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