

Virendra Kumar

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The Role of Instagram in Disseminating the Environment Protection Act, 1986 and Climate Change Awareness in Rural Gurgaon: A Pathway to Sustainable Development

Authors' Details

1. Virendra Kumar, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Mass Communication And Media Technology, SGT University, Gurugram Email:- virendra_smcf@sgtuniversity.org
2. Shubham Kumar Sah, Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication And Media, Central University of South Bihar, Gayaji, Bihar Email: skscusbhaya@gmail.com

Please address all correspondence regarding this manuscript to
Virendra Kumar at
virendra_smcf@sgtuniversity.org

The Role of Instagram in Disseminating the Environment Protection Act, 1986 and Climate Change Awareness in Rural Gurgaon: A Pathway to Sustainable Development

Abstract:

This study investigates how Instagram is being used as a tool to spread awareness about the Environment Protection Act, 1986, and climate change in rural areas of Gurgaon, Haryana. As mobile internet usage increases in rural regions, social media platforms, especially Instagram, are emerging as powerful communication tools. Through a survey conducted among rural youth and semi-urban residents in Gurgaon, this paper evaluates awareness levels, usage behaviour, and the influence of environmental content. The findings reveal the significance of regional language content, visual storytelling, and influencer-based outreach in building eco-consciousness. The study offers policy suggestions to integrate Instagram into rural environmental communication strategies.

Keywords: Instagram, Environment Protection Act 1986, Climate Change, Rural Gurgaon, Digital Communication, Social Media Awareness, Sustainable Development, Legal Literacy

1. Introduction

India, as in the case of most nations, is facing a new environmental crisis (Igini, 2024). Air and water pollution, deforestation, solid waste management, and climate change impacts are no longer confined to urban centres; they are also affecting rural communities. Rural communities, although traditionally rely on natural resources for agriculture and livelihood, are increasingly becoming vulnerable due to deteriorating environmental conditions. For this, environmental awareness and availability of legal information subsequently becomes critical for ensuring the safety of both human beings and environments. The Indian Government introduced the Environment Protection Act, 1986 as an overriding law for the central and state bodies, so that environment protection could be insured (Parliament of India, 1986).

The Act gives the central government powers to take required steps to protect and enhance the environment, and to control all types of environmental pollution. The Act is extremely important, but information and knowledge regarding the Act are not reachable to all, particularly among rural residents who are most exposed to environmental degradation. Traditionally, mediums of communication for awareness have been radio, print media, village meetings, and government contact programs (Sujoko et al., 2023) (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). With the rapid extension of internet penetration and the use of smartphone technology in rural India, now a new opportunity stands available in the form of social media. The social media, mainly Instagram's interactive and picture-oriented nature, have the opportunity to educate, inspire, and connect communities (Arts et al., 2021) (Jha & Verma, 2023).

Instagram has evolved from a photo-sharing application to an active online platform where people share stories, reels (short videos), and knowledge posts.

Indian rural youth are also using Instagram not only for entertainment purposes (Sah & Kumari, 2024), but also to remain informed about social and environmental issues (Hajri & Daife, 2024). There are few materials in the app in native languages, which can simplify complicated issues into simpler form (Mirković, 2022). This makes it possible to use Instagram as a tool for environmental legislation **such as the Environment Protection Act, 1986, and** spreading awareness on climate change effects. Young people are already using Instagram actively in rural areas such as Gurgaon district, Haryana.

They view pollution, tree plantation, waste management, and other environment videos. But only a few known about the environmental rights and the legal safeguards available to them under Indian law. This research will establish how Instagram can be utilized better to share such information so that legal awareness is one of the daily digital routines of rural youth (Kumar et al., 2023). With reference to rural Gurgaon, this study tries to find out how Instagram is making an impact in raising environmental awareness at the grassroots level. The study investigates usage patterns, interaction with posts, and self-reported influence of Instagram-driven environmental content. It also investigates whether visual media can be used as a middle ground between legal action and public awareness, thus promoting sustainable development and active citizenship in rural India.

2. Review of Literature

Digital communication platforms are playing a vital role in sharing environmental issues and legal information across populations. Several **scholars and institutions have examined the impact of social media in** fostering awareness, particularly in remote or underserved areas.

Gupta & Mishra (2021) in their study titled “Digital Media and Environmental Awareness in India” stated that visual and interactive platforms have a significant impact on younger audiences, especially when environmental messages are communicated through storytelling and multimedia. They also pointed out that platforms like Instagram and YouTube can be used as informal learning environments.

Jain & Rathi (2022) explored **the effectiveness of social media campaigns during the COVID-19** pandemic in rural India. Their research, published in the Media Journal, clearly states that WhatsApp and Facebook were widely used for health awareness, and recommended that similar digital tools could be adopted for other public issues such as environmental issues.

Sharma (2020) examined how short video content, particularly Instagram reels played a role in public behaviour change related to cleanliness and sanitation under the Swachh Bharat Mission. The study noted that content in local dialects had better reception and engagement, proving the importance of cultural relevance in digital messaging.

Kumar & Singh (2023) in their research “Social Media Influencers and Eco-Consciousness Among Indian Youth” observed that Instagram influencers who frequently share content about climate change,

pollution, or sustainable practices inspire behavioural shifts, particularly in urban and semi-urban regions. However, they also pointed out the gap in reach among rural users.

Government and NGO Reports: According to the Kantar India Digital Report (2023), rural smartphone usage has seen a steep rise, with platforms like Instagram now being used not just for entertainment but also for education and public discourse. Despite this growth, structured efforts by government agencies to utilize these platforms for spreading legal or environmental information remain limited.

Environment Protection Act, 1986: While the Act remains a cornerstone in India's environmental legal framework, studies show that public understanding of the Act is minimal, especially in non-urban areas (MoEFCC Reports, 2022). There is a lack of accessible, people-friendly formats to interpret and explain such laws to laypersons, especially those in rural areas.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess Instagram usage among rural populations in Gurgaon.
2. To understand the level of awareness about the Environment Protection Act, 1986 and climate change.
3. To explore how Instagram content influences environmental understanding.
4. To suggest recommendations for using Instagram as a tool for sustainable rural communication.

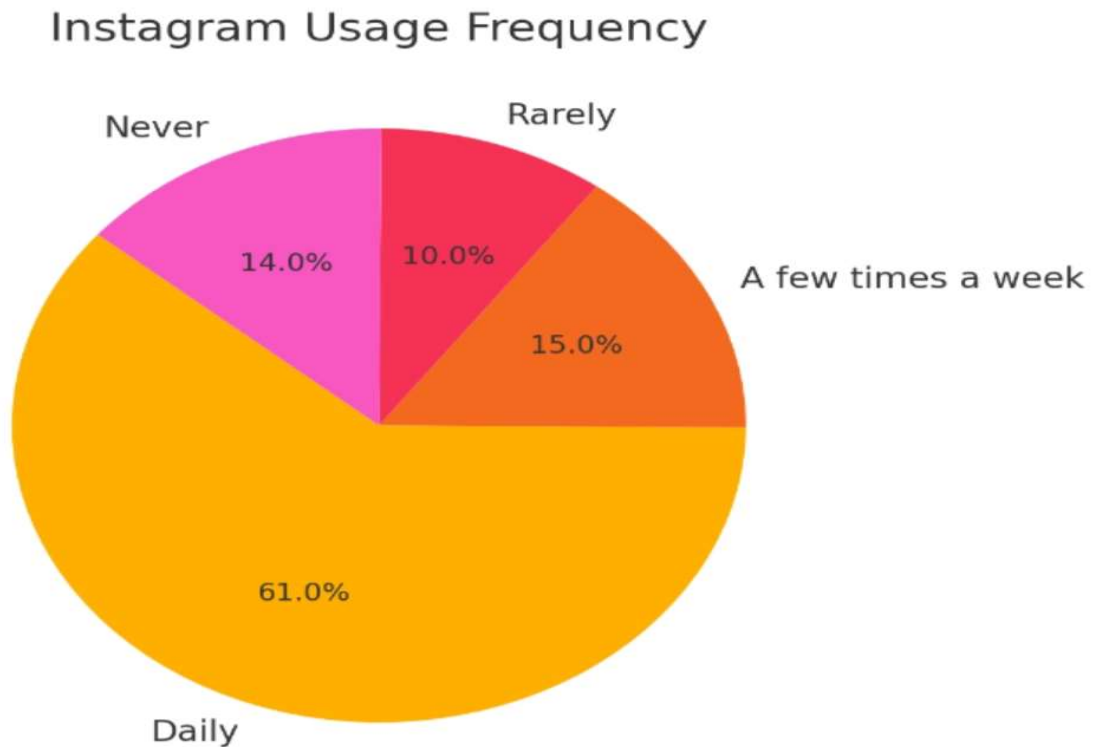
4. Methodology

The present research was conducted in the rural belt of Gurgaon, with a special focus on villages surrounding Sohna, Pataudi, and Badshahpur. These areas were selected since they have semi-urban character and increased exposure to digital technologies, thereby aligning with the theme of the study. 150 respondents were selected for the study, who were all aged between 16 and 30 years. This particular age group was chosen because it is a very active age group in terms of smartphone use and digital media engagement, which was Centre to study. For collecting primary data, a structured questionnaire was designed as the main study instrument. First, the questionnaire was printed and provided physically to determine availability for respondents in rural areas. At the end of data collection, the responses were typed into Google Forms to facilitate easier compilation and analysis. The study represents a descriptive and analytical study aimed at recording not only patterns of usage and behavior but also interpreting and analyzing the underlying trends and implications. Purposive sampling was utilized as the sampling method in this study. This non-probability sampling technique was particularly selected to reach smartphone users since the research was based on online access and communication behaviors in rural areas. Purposive sampling guaranteed that the sample consists of pertinent participants who would be capable of providing valid responses in accordance with the research objectives.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Survey findings showed:

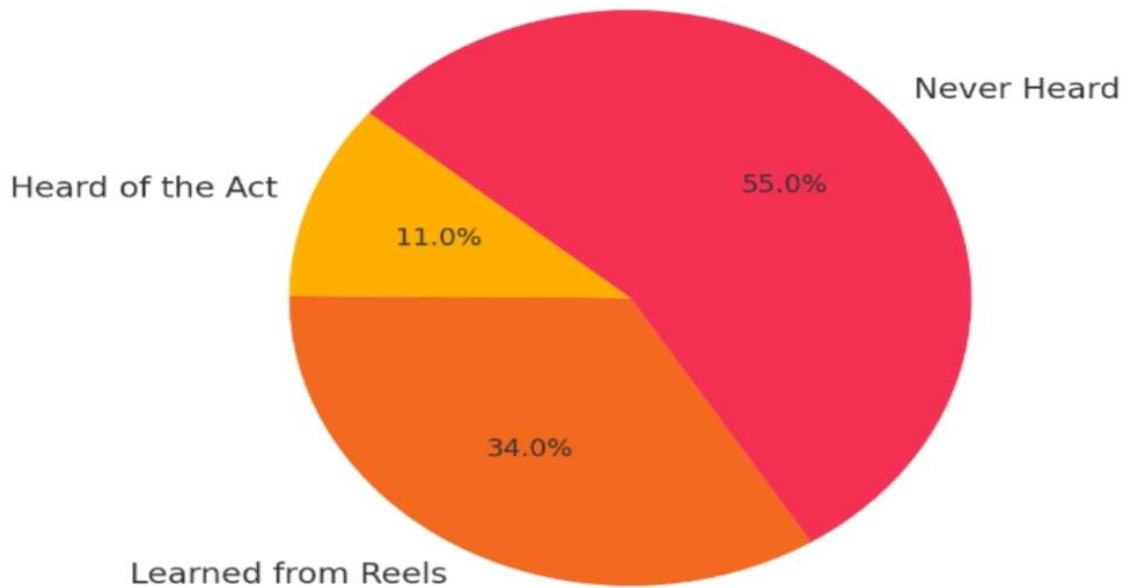
- **Instagram Usage Frequency** – Shows how often rural Gurgaon respondents use Instagram.



The findings of the study reveal a widespread usage of Instagram among the rural youth of Gurgaon. 76% of the participants reported using Instagram, which reflects the huge popularity of the site even in semi-urban and rural regions. This intense usage suggests that Instagram has crossed its image as a city-centric site and has successfully penetrated the user base in rural belts, especially among young people aged between 16–30. Its visually oriented platform, simplicity of use, and smartphone accessibility likely contribute to its growing influence. Also, of those who utilize Instagram, 61% utilize it daily. This not only is a high rate of adoption but also a day-to-day interaction with the website. Daily usage means that Instagram is not just source of entertainment but part of the daily online routine of the users. This frequent usage offers possibilities to leverage Instagram as a medium of communication, awareness campaigns, and social activism in rural areas. It is also reflective of the growing incorporation of social media into rural youth lives as rural youth culture, impacting the information they consume, the kind of lifestyle that they adopt, and even political and social values. Such observations are important for Policymakers and planners who are eager to communicate to rural audiences.

- **Awareness of the Environment Protection Act, 1986** – Highlights how many had prior knowledge or learned through Instagram.

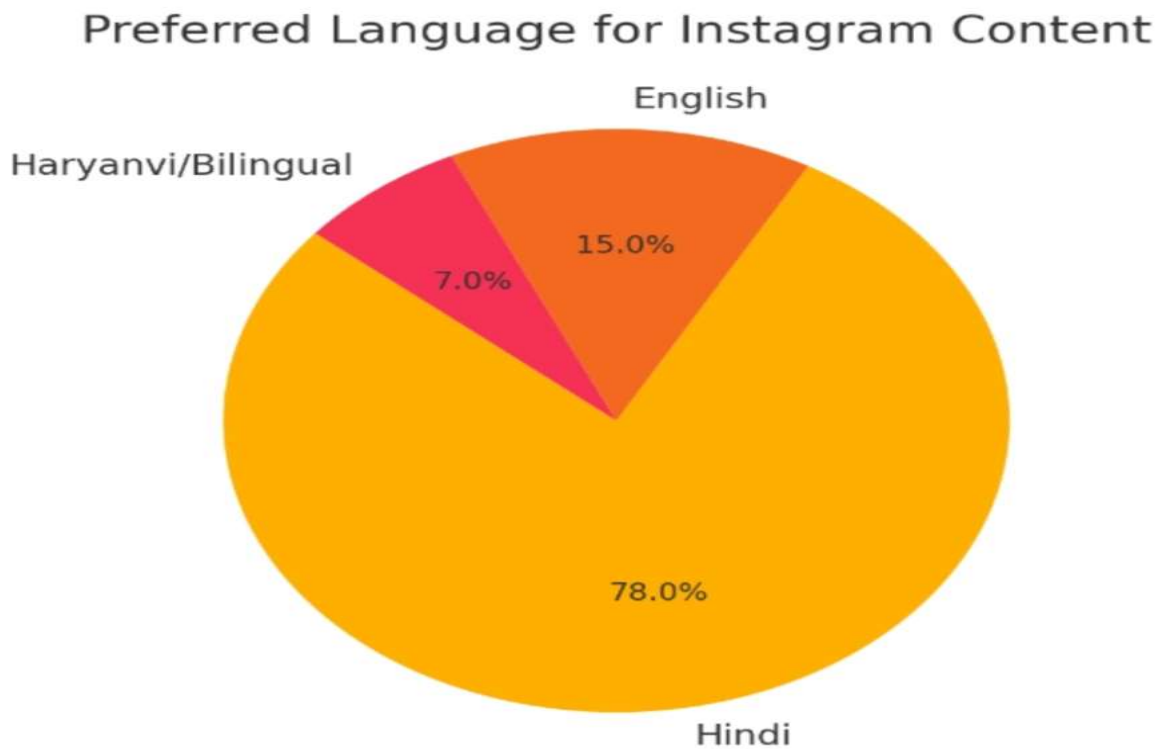
Awareness of Environment Protection Act, 1986



The research uncovers an alarming lack of environmental consciousness in rural youth since a mere 11% of the respondents indicated they had heard of the Environment Protection Act, 1986. The low rate of awareness discloses that important environmental legislation, even as a key legal framework for ecological protection in India, is little known among rural youths. The Environment Protection Act was put in place to give a detailed framework for the protection of the environment after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, but its applicability seems to be inadequately communicated outside of urban and policymaking circles. This is likely due to lack of access to environmental education, low penetration of media of informational content in regional languages, and the lack of focused campaigns in rural areas. Given the increasing impact of climate change and environmental damage on rural communities (who suffer first from these effects) the lack of awareness about this is sad. This highlights the need to get environmental education placed in mainstream curriculum of regular schools, in rural awareness camps, and rural outreach programs. In addition, this finding points towards the possibility of making use of mainstream channels such as Instagram, which the study identifies as a major source used by rural youth, to communicate environmental rights and environmental law information in more engaging and easier ways. Out of the very small number of respondents who were familiar with the Environment Protection Act, 1986, a significant 34% of them said they had heard about it from Instagram reels. This highlights that the short-form social media content specially Instagram reels can be used for disseminating knowledge about serious and frequently dense issues, such as environmental law. As older sources such as textbooks, newspapers, or established education systems appear to be lagging behind in conveying such key information, avenues such as Instagram are stepping up to fill this gap in

an informal and oftentimes entertainment-oriented manner. Instagram reels, by visual attraction and concise format, are most effective at reaching younger generations. In rural areas, where people may have limited digital knowledge or are busy with daily work, short videos like reels offer an easy way to share new information. The fact that over one-third of educated respondents learned about the Act through reels shows that social media can be a strong tool for civic and environmental awareness. But it also generates concerns regarding the accuracy and amount of information presented through such channels. While reels are useful for giving a quick introduction, it's important to make sure the content is both attractive and accurate, especially when it talks about serious laws and policies.

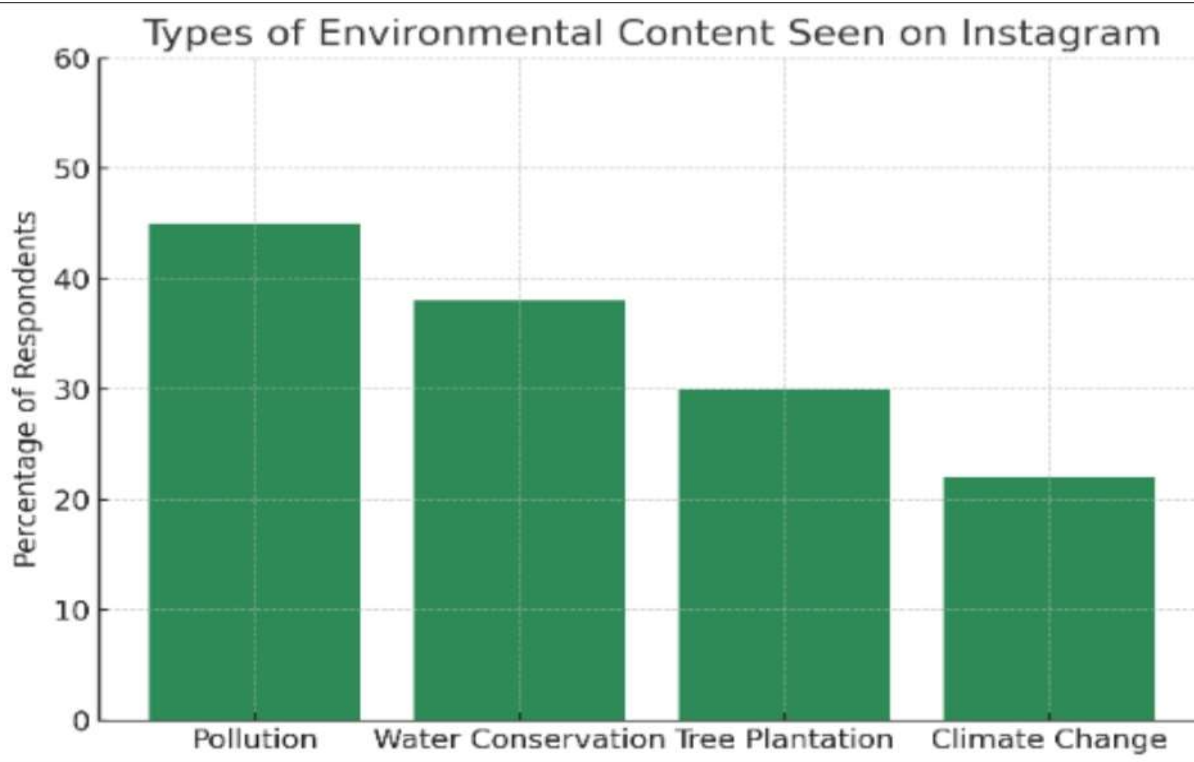
- **Preferred Language for Instagram Content** – Reflects the strong preference for Hindi and local dialects.



The study found that Hindi was the most preferred language for consuming content among rural youth, with 78% of respondents indicating it as their primary choice. This strong preference for Hindi highlights its dominance as a bridge language in rural Haryana, particularly in the Gurgaon region. It suggests that any awareness campaign or digital content aimed at this demographic should prioritize Hindi to ensure maximum reach and comprehension. English was the second-most preferred language, chosen by 15% of respondents. This indicates a modest but growing exposure to English, likely due to educational influences and the aspirational value associated with the language. However, the relatively low percentage also implies that content in English alone would exclude a large portion of the target audience. Interestingly, only 7% of respondents expressed a preference for local dialects such as Ahirwati or Haryanvi. While this may suggest limited digital content available in these

dialects, it also reflects the possibility that Hindi has become the default medium for both formal and informal communication in the region. Still, the inclusion of local dialects in environmental messaging could enhance relatability and emotional appeal, especially among older or less formally educated residents. These findings emphasize the need for a multilingual strategy with a clear focus on Hindi.

- **Types of Environmental Content Seen on Instagram** – Pollution and water conservation were the most recognized topics.

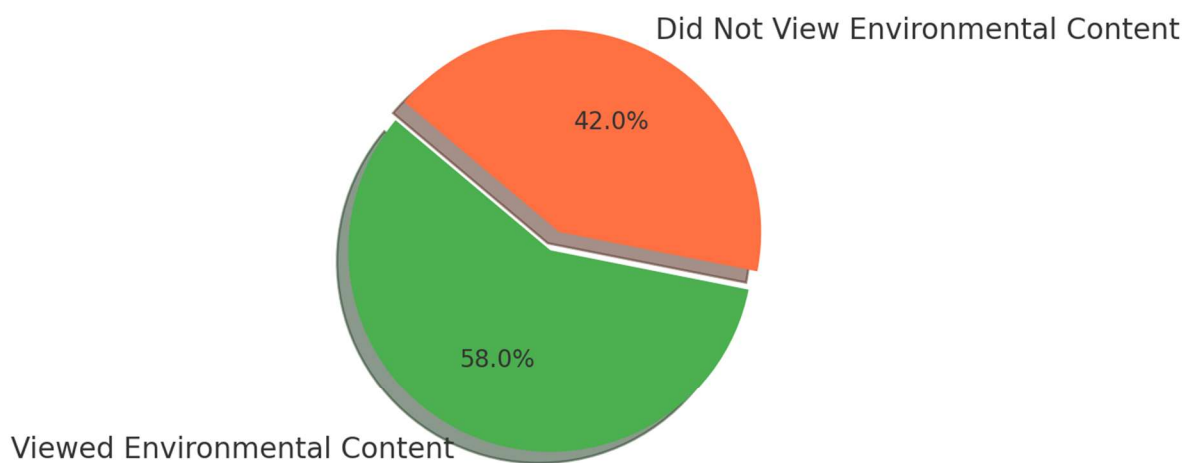


Among the population that had watched environmental content on social media, the most common encountered problems were pollution (45%), water conservation (38%), plantation of trees (30%), and global warming (22%). This categorization shows rural youth's interests and exposure to information on environmental issues. The most popular topic was pollution, and it should not come as a surprise as it is visible and tangible directly in one's daily life as air, water, or plastic pollution. It indicates growing sensitization among youngsters about the degeneration of their environment. Water conservation ranks the second most viewed issue at 38%, which relates to the actual difficulties faced by rural communities to have access to clean and sufficient water. That tree plantation (30%) ranks so high means that afforestation and greening activities are becoming the subject of attention among young people, perhaps as a reaction to school campaigns locally or social media challenges to share. Significantly, climate change is the most critical world problem with least commonly met topic at merely 22%. That is an indication of lack of awareness and content coverage and suggests that even while wide-ranging environmental issues are gaining steam, deeper and more complex subject matter like climate change

is yet to effectively penetrate rural communities. It indicates a need for enhanced digital storytelling and education on such crucial issues.

- **Exposure to Environmental Content on social media -**

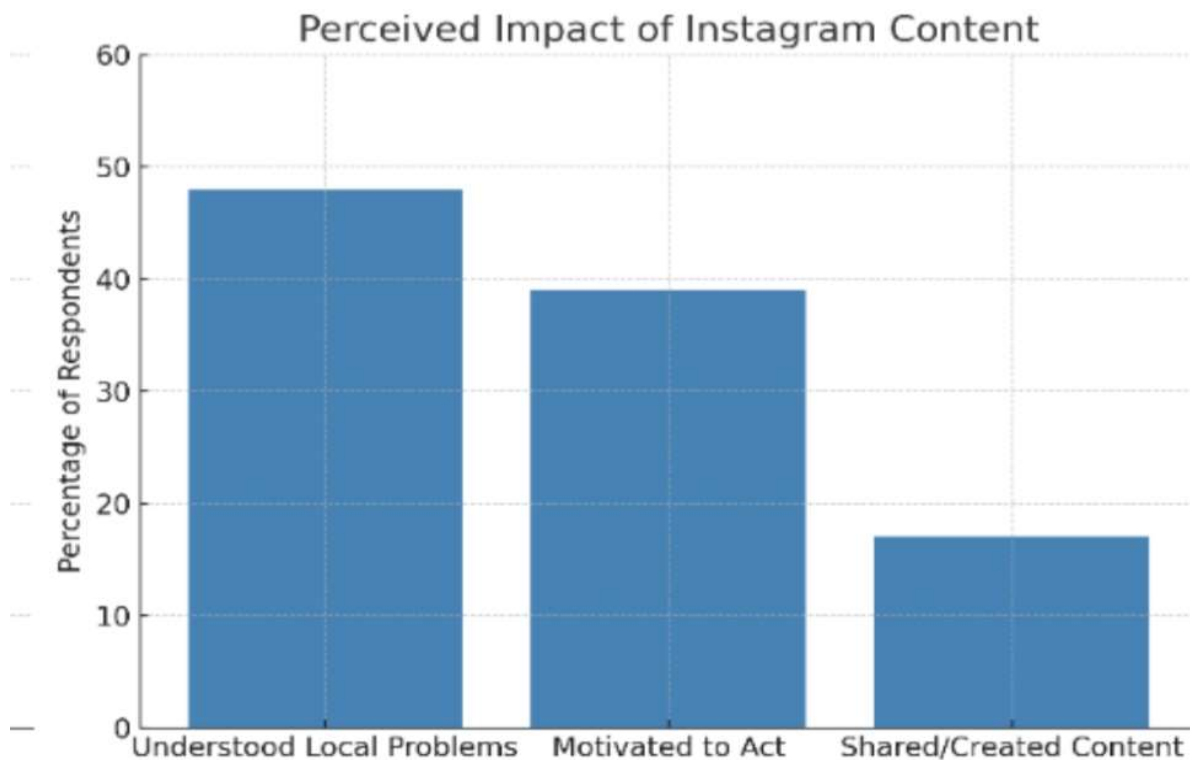
Exposure to Environmental Content on Social Media



58% of participants had viewed environmental information on social media, mainly on Instagram. This indicates a reasonable level of exposure among rural youth and demonstrates that the internet is increasingly contributing to raising awareness on matters of environmental concern. The manner in which individuals are consuming such content indicates the change that environmental messages are reaching people through, as opposed to traditional teaching techniques that are currently complemented or even complemented to some extent by social media content. This 58% level of engagement is significant in a rural setting, where environmental education may not be easily available. This is evidence that environmental messages through social media algorithms, content makers, and public awareness campaigns are entering the regular scroll of human activity. And because of it, the rest 42% is not viewing any environmental message at all, proving a digital gap, not merely in connectivity, but even the kind of information individuals use. Having environmental content on the internet is not adequate; the challenge is ensuring that people know it, recall it, and implement it. This figure indicates

hope as well as progress. It also reflects the necessity for more localized, concise, and visually appealing content in order to educate more rural users, particularly the youth, and enable them to recall and act upon it.

- **Perceived Impact of Instagram Content on Environmental Awareness and Action** – Many respondents felt Instagram helped them understand issues and motivated them, though fewer created content themselves.



The survey results highlight the significant role Instagram plays in shaping environmental awareness among rural youth. According to the data, **48% of respondents** reported that Instagram helped them better understand *local environmental problems*. This indicates that social media content (particularly short-form visual formats like reels and posts) is serving as an informal educational tool, enabling youth to relate global environmental narratives to their immediate surroundings. These insights show that platforms like Instagram are filling a gap where formal environmental education may be lacking in rural areas. Moreover, **39% of participants** stated that they felt *motivated to participate in environmental activities* such as tree plantation drives and cleanliness campaigns after viewing related content on Instagram. These points to the platform's ability not just to inform but also to inspire civic action. It reinforces the idea that consistent, relatable, and action-oriented content can move youth from awareness to participation. However, only **17% of respondents** reported that they had *shared or created environmental content themselves*. This reflects a low level of content creation engagement, suggesting that while youth are absorbing messages, they are not yet active contributors in the digital

environmental discourse. Addressing this participation gap through training in digital communication and environmental advocacy could transform passive viewers into proactive community voices.

6. Discussion&Conclusion

The data analysis reveals a complex yet insightful picture of environmental awareness and social media engagement among rural youth in the Gurgaon region. A significant 76% of respondents reported using Instagram, with 61% using it daily, highlighting the platform's deep integration into their daily routines. Despite this high engagement, only 11% had heard of the Environment Protection Act, 1986, indicating a concerning gap in formal environmental awareness. Interestingly, among those who were aware, 34% credited Instagram reels as their source of information, underlining the growing role of short-form digital content in informal education.

Over half of the respondents (58%) had encountered environmental content online, demonstrating the potential of social media to serve as a tool for awareness generation. However, the topics most commonly seen pollution (45%), water conservation (38%), and tree plantation (30%) were largely surface-level and practical in nature. Climate change, a critical global concern, appeared in only 22% of responses, signaling a need for more focused content on complex environmental issues.

Overall, the findings suggest that while digital platforms like Instagram have penetrated rural youth culture and offer opportunities for awareness-building, there is still a pressing need to enhance the depth, accuracy, and reach of environmental communication in these digital spaces.

The results suggest that Instagram is a growing digital tool among rural youth, who are visually oriented and influenced by relatable content in their regional language. Legal terms like “Environment Protection Act” may sound technical, but when simplified and visualized in Hindi or Haryanvi through Instagram reels, the reach and impact increase.

Challenges such as digital literacy, misinformation, and lack of legal explanation in simple terms were also observed. Yet, the positive intent and curiosity of users show that with proper guidance, Instagram can become a powerful tool for environmental justice in rural areas.

7. Suggestions and Recommendations

In order to enhance environmental awareness and participation among rural youth, the following targeted strategies are advised. First and foremost, local-level campaigns should take precedence. Government authorities and NGOs can engage with local content developers and bloggers at the regional level and create content in the local languages and dialects, thus increasing the reach and relevance of the message to the rural people. Local-level campaigns can create a stronger bond with the audience and make them participate with greater probability. Second, eco-ambassador training is

essential. Village youth leaders can be educated on content creation so that they can serve as ambassadors for the cause of the environment in their local communities. The trained leaders can produce contextual and effective content, further broadening the scope of environmental messaging. Moreover, multilingual legal reels detailing environmental legislation and rights in Hindi and local dialects would make vital legal information more widely available. Short videos are perfect for demystifying lengthy legal content into bite-sized and interesting formats. To ensure digital accessibility, creating public digital access points like shared telephones, Wi-Fi hotspots, or library-based access points would narrow the technology divide and enable more rural youth to access and share environmental content. Finally, there should be a collaboration of fact-checking with reputable fact-checking bodies to ascertain the veracity of legal and environmental information published online to engender trust and credibility in the content. Implementing these strategies, the accessibility and efficacy of environmental education using social media can greatly be enhanced to establish an enlightened and participative rural youth society.

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