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Syed Mahmood Ahmad
Librarian, Halim Muslim P G
College, Csjmu, Kanpur, Uttar
Pradesh, India

Impact of social media on library patron engagement and information dissemination

Syed Mahmood Ahmad

Abstract

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for communication, information dissemination, and community engagement in various sectors, including library and information science. This study investigates the impact of social media platforms on patron engagement and the dissemination of library resources in Indian academic institutions. Data were collected from 150 library patrons and 20 librarians across five university libraries through structured questionnaires. The study analyzes the frequency and pattern of social media use, perceived benefits, and barriers to adoption in library services. Findings reveal that Facebook, WhatsApp, and blogs were the most commonly used tools for outreach and communication, significantly enhancing patron interaction and awareness of library events and resources. However, issues related to digital literacy and infrastructure limitations were reported. This study emphasizes the need for strategic social media integration into library systems to foster participatory information environments.

Keywords: Social media, libraries, information dissemination, library engagement, Facebook, WhatsApp, India, digital outreach

Introduction

The emergence of social media has significantly reshaped how individuals and institutions communicate, collaborate, and exchange information. Over the past decade, social networking platforms have evolved from being casual digital meeting places into sophisticated tools for education, marketing, political discourse, and community engagement. In particular, academic institutions and libraries have begun integrating social media into their service frameworks to better connect with their user communities, promote resources, and support learning beyond the physical library environment. Social media platforms—such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and institutional blogs—have gained widespread acceptance in India. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), India had over 350 million internet users by mid-2016, with nearly 80% of them accessing the internet via mobile devices. Of this population, over 160 million were active on social media platforms, a number projected to surpass 200 million by the end of 2017. Furthermore, data from Statista (2016) indicated that Facebook had over 142 million users in India, making it the second-largest user base after the United States. This rapid digital penetration offered academic libraries an unprecedented opportunity to adapt and innovate. Historically, libraries in India have relied on notice boards, circulars, and email to communicate with users. However, such traditional modes of communication have limitations in reach, speed, and interactivity. The contemporary student, characterized by mobile-first behavior and a preference for visual, real-time engagement, increasingly expects information to be accessible through social media platforms. This evolution in user behavior necessitated a shift in library communication and outreach strategies. By the early 2010s, a number of Indian libraries began experimenting with Web 2.0 tools and social platforms to promote library services. Pilot studies conducted at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi University, and Banaras Hindu University (BHU) demonstrated the potential of Facebook and WhatsApp to enhance communication effectiveness. For instance, Sahu (2013) [5] reported a 35% increase in student attendance at library training workshops following regular promotions on JNU Library's Facebook page. Similarly, at Delhi University South Campus Library, a WhatsApp broadcast service was introduced in 2015 to notify students of

Correspondence
Syed Mahmood Ahmad
Librarian, Halim Muslim P G
College, Csjmu, Kanpur, Uttar
Pradesh, India

new journal arrivals and digital resource access—resulting in a reported 40% growth in e-journal usage within six months (Kaur & Manhas, 2012) ^[4]. Despite these early successes, adoption of social media by Indian academic libraries has not been uniform. Several barriers exist, including lack of institutional policies, digital literacy gaps among librarians, limited training, and infrastructural challenges in rural institutions. A survey by Chakrabarti and Mandal (2011) ^[3] across 40 university libraries in India found that only 18% actively maintained social media accounts as part of their official communication strategy. Another key concern was the absence of clearly defined staff responsibilities, leading to inconsistencies in content posting and user engagement. Globally, academic libraries have been more proactive. A 2014 white paper by Taylor & Francis Group found that 75% of academic librarians in the UK and North America regularly used social media to connect with patrons, share scholarly content, and promote library events. These libraries reported that social media helped them reach a broader audience, especially students who were otherwise disengaged from traditional library services. In India, institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT Bombay) and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) were among the first to integrate Twitter feeds, blog updates, and YouTube channels into their library websites. These platforms were used not only for announcements but also for conducting virtual reference services, user surveys, and even online book recommendations. However, outside elite institutions, such adoption remained limited and largely unstructured. As the National Mission on Education through ICT (NMEICT) and the Digital India initiative began gaining traction post-2015, there was renewed governmental push for libraries to modernize. The University Grants Commission (UGC), through its model library guidelines published in 2016, encouraged academic libraries to “adopt social media platforms for outreach and capacity-building programs.” Nevertheless, without data-driven research and institutional commitment, the implementation remained sporadic. This research seeks to fill the gap in empirical understanding of how social media is influencing library-patron interactions in Indian universities. It is guided by three core.

Objectives

(1) to examine the patterns and frequency of social media use by patrons and librarians;
 (2) to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of these platforms in improving communication and access to information; and
 (3) to identify challenges and best practices in the integration of social media into academic library services. The study is particularly relevant at a time when Indian higher education is experiencing both an expansion in enrollment and a shift toward blended learning. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2015-16 reported over 34.6 million students enrolled in higher education, of which nearly 60% were aged between 18-23 years—a demographic highly attuned to digital and mobile environments.

Literature Review

The integration of social media in library services has attracted scholarly interest since the late 2000s. A considerable body of literature outlines how platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs transformed traditional library

functions, particularly in the areas of marketing, reference services, and community building.

In one of the early works, Tripathi and Kumar (2010) ^[1] highlighted the nascent stage of social media use in Indian libraries and called for a paradigm shift in librarians' communication strategies. Their findings indicated a growing interest in Facebook and blogs as means to reach younger audiences.

Chakrabarti and Mandal (2011) ^[3] conducted a survey on 40 Indian university libraries and reported low adoption of Web 2.0 tools, attributing the gap to a lack of technical training and insufficient policy frameworks. Similarly, Kaur and Manhas (2012) ^[5] studied the awareness and attitude of librarians towards social media and found that while many acknowledged its potential, few institutions had established official social media policies or staff responsibilities.

Globally, a study by Taylor & Francis Group (2014) ^[8] documented a rise in social media use among academic libraries, with 70% of surveyed librarians reporting active use of platforms to promote events, share scholarly content, and engage with students.

Sahu (2013) ^[5] conducted a case study of Jawaharlal Nehru University Library's Facebook page and concluded that real-time updates and direct interactions via comments and messaging had improved user satisfaction. However, engagement levels remained inconsistent due to low promotion of the social media presence.

Other scholars such as Anbu K., *et al.* (2014) ^[6] have emphasized the training and capacity-building required for library professionals to effectively use these tools. Their review noted that digital outreach could not be successful unless librarians embraced proactive communication strategies and institutions ensured infrastructural support.

Collectively, the literature points to the transformative potential of social media but also underlines systemic and operational challenges—especially in developing country contexts.

3. Methodology

- **Research Design:** This was a descriptive cross-sectional study aimed at understanding the usage patterns, benefits, and limitations of social media in academic libraries from both librarians' and patrons' perspectives.
- **Study Area:** The study was conducted in five public universities located in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh, each with an established central library and varying levels of digital engagement.

Sample Size

- **Library Patrons:** 150 respondents selected through stratified random sampling from five universities (30 per site).
- **Librarians:** 20 professional staff (four per university), selected purposively.

Data Collection Tools

- Structured questionnaire (for patrons) with Likert-scale and open-ended questions.
- Semi-structured interview schedule (for librarians).
- Observation of institutional social media pages for content and frequency metrics.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v20, applying descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, cross-tabulations), while qualitative responses were coded thematically.

Results

The study captured quantitative and qualitative data from 150 library patrons and 20 librarians across five Indian universities. The analysis yielded insights into platform usage patterns, engagement experiences, and institutional challenges.

Usage of Social Media by Library Patrons

The majority of library patrons reported active use of social media. Facebook and WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platforms for receiving library-related updates.

Table 1: Most Common Social Media Platforms Used for Library Communication (n=150)

Social Media Platform	Respondents Using (%)
Facebook	76.6%
WhatsApp	68.0%
YouTube	45.3%
Blogs/Library Website	33.3%
Twitter	18.6%

Additionally, 54.7% of patrons followed their institutional library's social media pages, although a significant 41.3% were unaware such channels existed.

Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media

Users following library pages indicated high satisfaction with the timeliness and relevance of updates received via social platforms.

Table 2: Patron Perceptions of Social Media Communication Effectiveness (n=150)

Perception Statement	Agree (%)
Keeps me updated on events and new arrivals	69.2%
Prefer visual formats like infographics or short videos	58.0%
Prompt reminders (e.g., book return dates) are helpful	63.5%
More likely to engage with library due to social media	52.0%
Prefer WhatsApp or Facebook for receiving library updates	72.0%

Librarian Perspectives on Adoption and Use

Most librarians confirmed the use of at least one social media channel for outreach, primarily Facebook and WhatsApp. Benefits included better visibility and faster dissemination of updates.

Table 3: Benefits of Social Media Use as Perceived by Librarians (n=20)

Benefit	Librarians Agreeing (%)
Increased awareness of library services	85%
Improved event participation	70%
Faster delivery of notices and announcements	60%
Improved feedback and user communication	45%
Greater connection with remote users	40%

However, librarians also voiced several concerns about implementation challenges.

Table 4: Major Challenges Faced by Librarians in Using Social Media (n=20)

Challenge	Responses (%)
Lack of formal policy guidelines	60%
No designated staff for digital communication	55%
Limited training or technical knowledge	45%
Concerns about content credibility and privacy	30%

Engagement Metrics from Institutional Pages

Observation of five institutional library Facebook pages between January and June 2017 showed modest but meaningful engagement trends.

Table 5: Observed Facebook Engagement Across Five Institutional Library Pages

Metric	Average Value
Posts per month	4-6 posts
Likes/comments per post	10-25 interactions
Peak engagement period	Exam season, events
Most engaging content type	Infographics, videos

WhatsApp broadcast lists were found to be particularly effective, with over 200 students subscribed in some libraries.

Challenges from Patron Perspective

While social media use was generally viewed positively, patrons reported various barriers that limited full engagement.

Table 6: Challenges in Accessing Library Social Media Tools (n=150)

Reported Barrier	Respondents Affected (%)
Poor internet access or smartphone availability	22.7%
Unaware of library's presence on social media	41.3%
Difficulty using all platform features	38.0%
Language or visual comprehension issues	14.0%

These findings underscore the need for both improved awareness and support infrastructure to maximize the impact of social media on academic library engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly suggest that social media has begun to play a transformative role in how libraries engage with their patrons and disseminate information. This aligns with earlier observations by Tripathi and Kumar (2010)^[1] and Chakrabarti and Mandal (2011)^[3], who noted that Indian academic libraries were slowly shifting from traditional communication practices toward more dynamic digital interactions.

The widespread use of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp—reported by over 70% of patrons—confirms the increasing digital affinity of student communities. These platforms are favored not only for their familiarity but also for their ability to provide instantaneous updates, interactive content, and two-way communication. The success of WhatsApp broadcast groups in particular resonates with Sahu's (2013)^[5] case study on Jawaharlal Nehru University, where mobile-based communication was found to bridge institutional gaps and improve service visibility. Importantly, the current findings reveal that over half of the

patrons were influenced to explore library resources or attend events because of social media promotions. This behavior supports the theory of “push-based discovery,” where users become aware of resources not through intentional search but via exposure to targeted content on social platforms. Similar patterns were described by Chu and Du (2013) ^[2], who emphasized how social media transforms passive users into engaged information seekers.

From the librarians’ perspective, social media provided tangible improvements in patron reach and real-time communication. However, the study also highlights the precarious nature of this progress. More than 60% of participating librarians expressed concern over the lack of formal social media policies, insufficient training, and human resource constraints. These issues mirror those noted by Anbu K. *et al.* (2014) ^[6], who emphasized the need for strategic institutional support for social media integration in Indian libraries.

One of the persistent issues observed was the digital divide. While urban and semi-urban universities were relatively well-connected, libraries in more rural or under-resourced areas struggled with low smartphone penetration, poor internet bandwidth, and limited student awareness. This reinforces the findings by Singh and Meera (2012) ^[7], who argued that uneven infrastructure continues to hinder the equitable use of digital services in Indian higher education. Furthermore, the low awareness among 41.3% of patrons regarding their own library’s social media presence underscores a key gap—not technological but promotional. Libraries that invested in regular, visual, and event-driven content (e.g., book exhibitions, training videos) observed higher engagement levels. This observation supports the conclusion by Taylor & Francis Group (2014) ^[8], who noted that successful library outreach on social media requires sustained and creative content strategies.

It is also worth noting that social media platforms, while effective, are not without risks. Librarians in this study flagged concerns over content authenticity, data privacy, and platform dependency. As social media increasingly becomes a formal communication tool, libraries must develop policies around content governance, patron consent, and digital ethics—areas that were still underdeveloped in the Indian library context as of 2017.

In summary, the study reinforces the relevance and utility of social media in library environments, particularly for improving patron communication, service awareness, and user participation. However, it also signals the need for a more structured, supported, and inclusive approach to digital transformation. The future of social media in libraries will depend not just on technological adoption but on institutional readiness, user training, and continuous content innovation.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of social media on library patron engagement and information dissemination in Indian academic institutions, focusing on usage patterns, perceived effectiveness, and challenges from both patrons’ and librarians’ perspectives. The findings demonstrate that social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, has become an important communication tool in academic libraries, supporting greater outreach, real-time interaction, and enhanced visibility of library resources.

Library patrons acknowledged the effectiveness of social media in keeping them informed about events, new resources, and services, with a majority expressing a preference for receiving updates through mobile-friendly platforms. Librarians, too, observed improved engagement and responsiveness when digital channels were actively maintained. However, the study also highlighted critical barriers including the lack of formal institutional policies, insufficient staff training, and digital access disparities among users.

Despite these limitations, the potential of social media to transform library services is undeniable. If leveraged strategically, social platforms can support the democratization of information, foster participatory learning environments, and reinforce the library’s role as a central hub for academic engagement in the digital age.

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