



Social Media Use and Changing Public Space: A Sociological Study of District Murshidabad

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 10-01-2022	The study began with qualitative observations of social life in rural Murshidabad. Such qualitative observations were free from preconceived notions about the research area. Initial observations revealed that social media (SM) usage has become an essential part of daily life and is changing the interaction patterns of users. Building on these primary findings, the study further investigates SM use through e-interview-schedule and case study methods. The case studies focused on individuals who demonstrated patterns of excessive SM use as identified through quantification. After analyzing the data using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study concludes that SM usage has significantly impacted the research field and has contributed to social change. Ultimately, the findings are aligned with Habermas' theory of the public sphere and Bauman's theory of liquid life. This theoretical alignment with the examined data shows that utilization of SM is reinforcing changes and transforming the public sphere into a liquid sphere.
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Introduction:

This study began with field observations (Srinivas, 1976) (Bailey, 1972) (Betelle, 2001) that were free from preconceived notions and prior theoretical interpretations. Initial observations in a rural society revealed significant changes in traditional patterns of interaction and amusement. Previously, interactions were primarily face-to-face, as people engaged in activities such as gossiping within families or in marketplaces, attending weekly markets, participating in religious gatherings, and observing fish sellers at work. However, these traditional forms of interaction are gradually reducing, as individuals are now relying on SM to facilitate their connections. Today, SM users are using these platforms to strengthen their social relationships. They use SM to organize religious gatherings, sports events, and learning activities, as well as to share ideas through images and thoughts and engage in political participation. These findings follow an inductive logic of inquiry (Blakie, 2010), starting with primary observations, leading to limited generalizations, and culminating in theoretical interpretations. This study examines the primary observations (Bernard, 2008) through mixed methods and ultimately interprets the results using Habermas' theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991) and Bauman's concept of liquid life (Bauman, 2005). Habermas explains that, the public sphere is for critical debates and discussions and it is accessed by all citizens. Habermas focused upon the barrier free communication (Ritzer, 2010) underscores the changing notions of private and public sphere in the research field. Such ongoing changes explored with the Habermas' theory of public sphere when further corroborated with the Bauman's theory on liquid life reveals that the social life in the research field has been transformed as liquid sphere.

Research Design:

This research employs a mixed methodology that incorporates both positivism and interpretivism (Ritzer, 2010). Positivism enables a structured exploration of the various factors affecting the acceptance of digital information and technology among rural communities in India, facilitating organized data gathering and

analysis to uncover trends. Conversely, interpretivism recognizes the subjective aspects of human experiences and the surrounding social context, highlighting the significance of individual perceptions and beliefs. This approach aids in understanding the motivations and obstacles encountered by rural populations concerning digital technologies. By integrating quantitative analysis from positivism (Haralambos & Heald, 2001) with qualitative insights from interpretivism, the research provides a comprehensive examination of technology adoption and its use in rural Murshidabad.

Data Collection: The research focused upon students and working population among rural youth aged 14 to 30 in the Rural Murshidabad of Jangipur constituency, involving 315 participants. A mixed-methods approach (Blaikie, 2010) was employed to gather data on socio-economic factors, demographics, and SM usage through e-interview-schedule. Qualitative insights regarding the advantages and disadvantages of SM were collected from a smaller sub sample of respondents and their parents, particularly those exhibiting signs of excessive engagement on SM. The study examined patterns of SM usage across various backgrounds; gender, age and occupation explored relationships among different variables, and included case studies of actual SM utilization.

Sampling:

Judgemental Sampling: Judgemental sampling, a non-probability technique, selects participants based on the researcher's existing understanding of the population. This method facilitates focused data collection, ensuring that participants align with the research objectives. For example, collecting information from older adults to explore excessive SM usage would be unproductive. Therefore, employing judgemental sampling allows the researcher to reduce inaccuracies by selecting participants from particular age demographics, thereby improving the overall quality of the data gathered.

Data Collection Tools:

CADAC (Computer Assisted Data Collection): During the field study, there was the risks of pandemic return, therefore, in that circumstances Computer Assisted Interviewing (CAI) is an essential research method for my proposed thesis. The intended respondents are avid users of smartphones, which facilitates easy communication between the respondents and the researcher regarding the interview schedule through digital means. The "e-interview schedule" has demonstrated its effectiveness in gathering quantitative data.

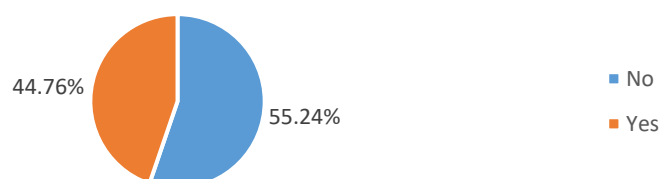
Data Analysis and Interpretations:

After data collection, the results are showcased through both quantification and interpretation. This section explained qualitative observations, quantifies the information gathered, and interprets it in light of existing theories. Over the past ten years, SM has taken the place of traditional ways of communication. In the past, community members would gather at 'Haat' (local-market) or utilize loudspeakers for religious programme to disseminate the information. A member of the scheduled caste, who once conveyed village news by beating a drum at events, has now focused exclusively on shoe-repairing because SM use has changed the ways of information circulation. This transition highlights how SM enables users to engage across different locations without moving from their physical positions, turning social interactions into a dynamic digital environment. The upcoming sections will examine the use of SM in various social scenarios.

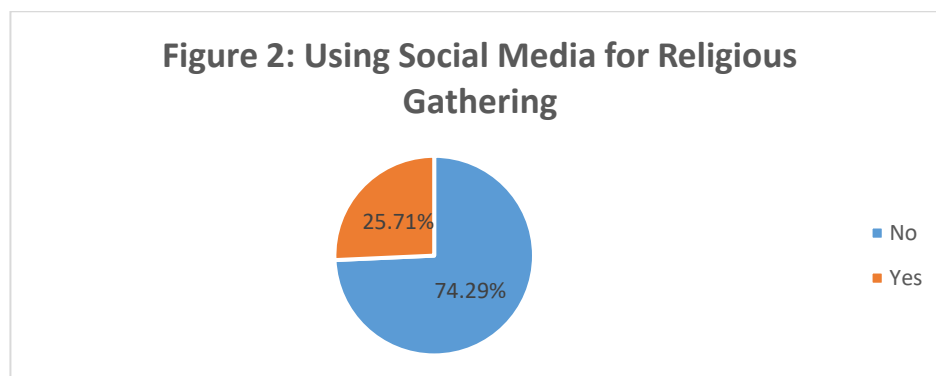
Section (a)

Using SM for maintaining social relationships: The data below indicates rising use of SM in strengthening social relationships. Previously, people relied on traditional communication methods to maintain their connections. These traditional methods included annual gatherings in villages, where residents would visit one another. For example, in Khanpur village, the village haat (Local market) serves as a popular meeting place where elders gather after the Morning Prayer. In Hiranpur village, people would meet after the Night Prayer. With the rise of SM, the rate of communication has increased, allowing individuals to maintain their social relationships across multiple levels. SM users feel that their relationships have improved due to their use of these platforms. The figures below illustrate SM behavior in maintaining social relationships.

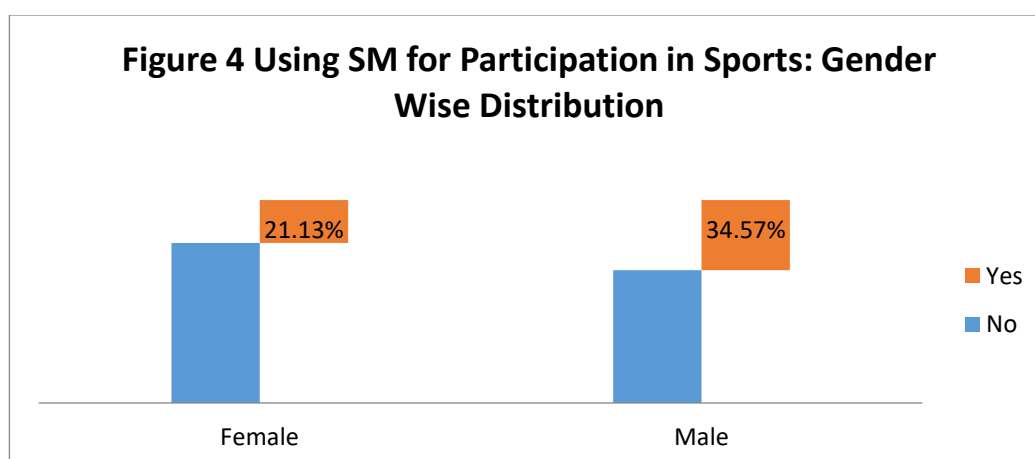
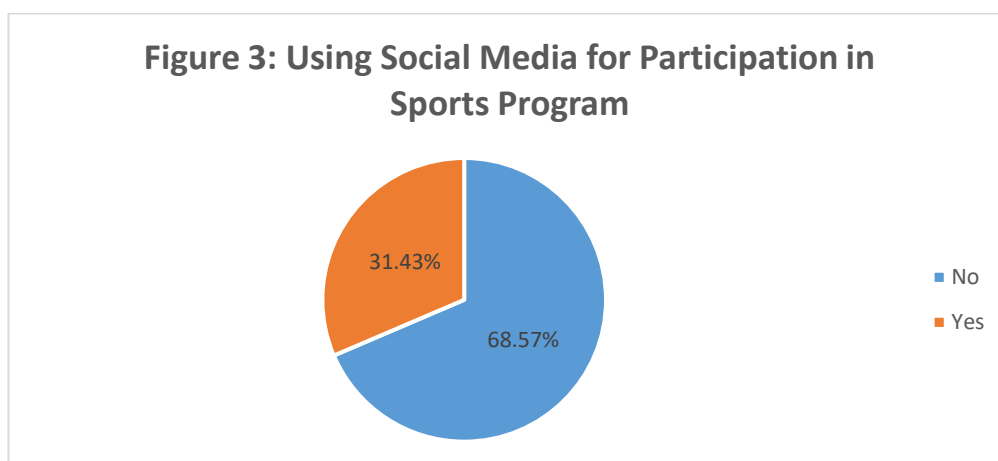
Figure 1: Using Social Media strengthening social relationships



Use of SM for religious gathering: The rising prevalence of SM has affected all facets of life, including its role in religious programme. This change suggests that SM is beginning to impact religion and its influence that once allowed little use or placed restrictions on its usage. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, about 25.71% of all SM users participate in it for religious gatherings, while a considerable majority, 74.29%, refrain from using it for such reasons. Furthermore, **Figure 15** indicates that both male and female users engage with SM for this purpose in equal measure.



Using Social Media for participation in Sports Program: In this aspect, it has been noted that patterns of entertainment are evolving. Villagers are increasingly turning to digital technology for their recreational activities. Even with these changing trends, a significant number of youth and adolescents still show enthusiasm for outdoor pursuits, especially football. The organization of football matches and the gathering of spectators at the village level—across groups of villages—have been fostered by the growing popularity of SM. According to **Figure 3**, 31.43% of social media users engage with it for sports-related events, while 68.75% do not. **Figure 4** illustrates the differences in SM engagement by gender: male users participate in SM for this reason at a much higher rate than their female counterparts. Generally, there are few sports events arranged for women in the villages. Instead, women often meet at the Ghaat (typically located by the riverbanks or next to a pond) to engage in play. Moreover, female students from the village take part in some activities held at tuition centers.



Concluding Observations: The examination of both quantitative and qualitative data shows that the rising use of SM has increased interaction rates among users and affected their lifestyles. This rise in engagement has changed daily life into a more fluid and adaptable environment. Furthermore, the variations in SM usage across gender and age suggest that traditional norms in rural areas shape how these groups participate in SM. This can be viewed as a social barrier within the changing context of the liquid sphere (Bauman, 2005).

Section (b)

Use of Social Media for Learning Activities and Emerging Liquid Sphere: This section examines the impact of SM in the field of education. In traditional rural communities, formal education was mainly conducted in person. However, since the COVID pandemic, the usage of SM has increased significantly, enabling learners and teachers to engage without needing to be in the same physical space. SM provides advantages to rural areas by promoting group study sessions, improving communication with educators, and offering access to information regarding competitive exams and current events. This section will investigate how SM improves interactions within formal educational settings.

Figure 5 Social Media as Helpful tool for study:Overall Responses

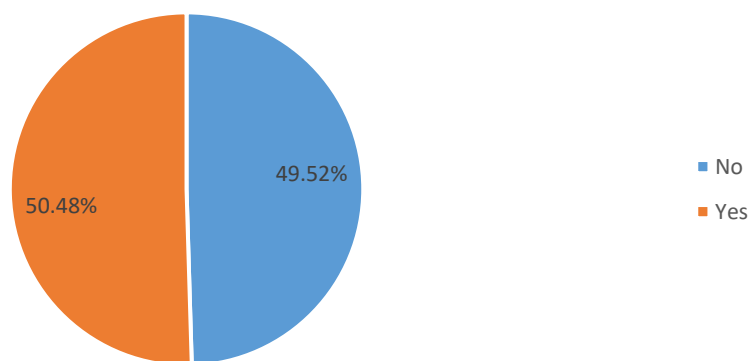
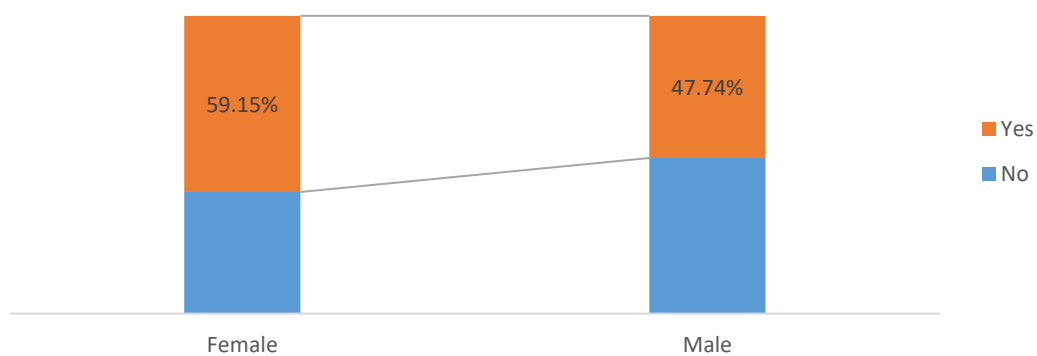


Figure 6 Taking Social Media Help in Studies: Gender Wise Distribution



This section presents data on the use of SM in school and formal education. Qualitative observations indicate an increasing trend in SM usage, particularly in post-pandemic student-to-student and teacher-to-student study groups, which are now common. According to **Figure 5**, around half of respondents find SM useful for studying. **Figure 6** reveals gender differences, with female users actively leveraging SM for their studies and rating it as more helpful than male users. Furthermore, female students dominate tuition centers, while male participation is notably lower.

Figure 7 Social Media Helpful in Group Studies: Total responses

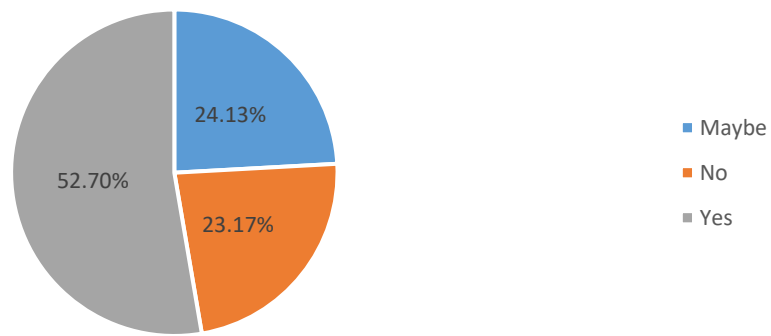
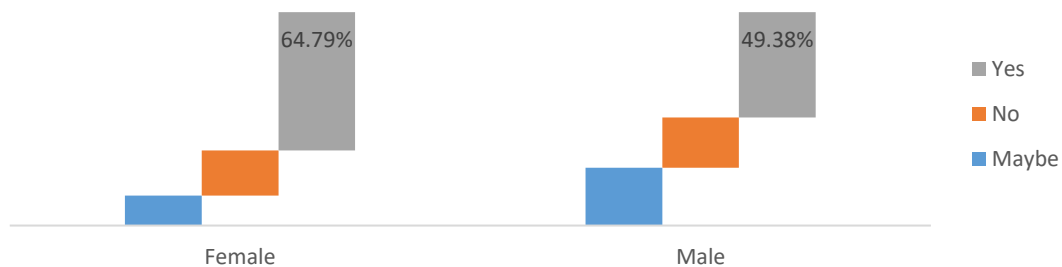
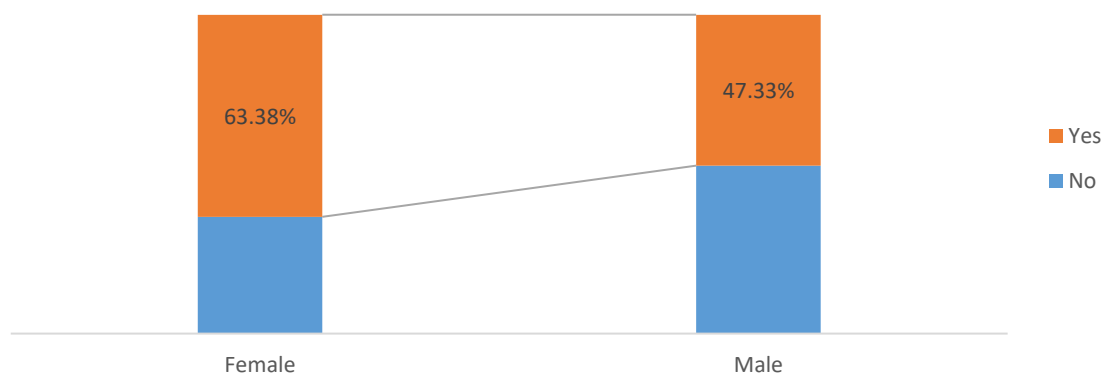


Figure 8 Using Social Media For Group Studies: Gender Wise Distribution

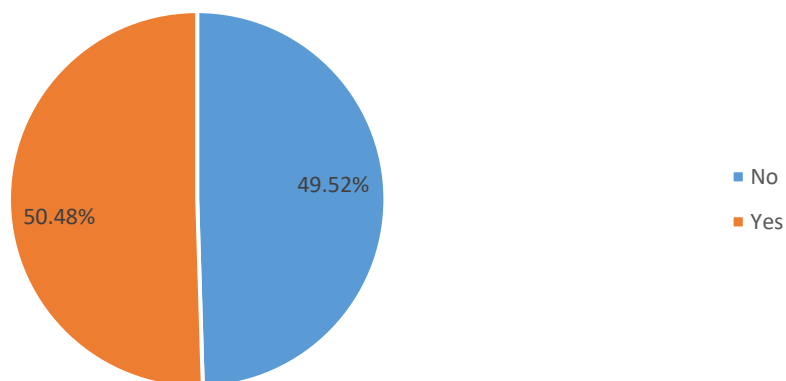
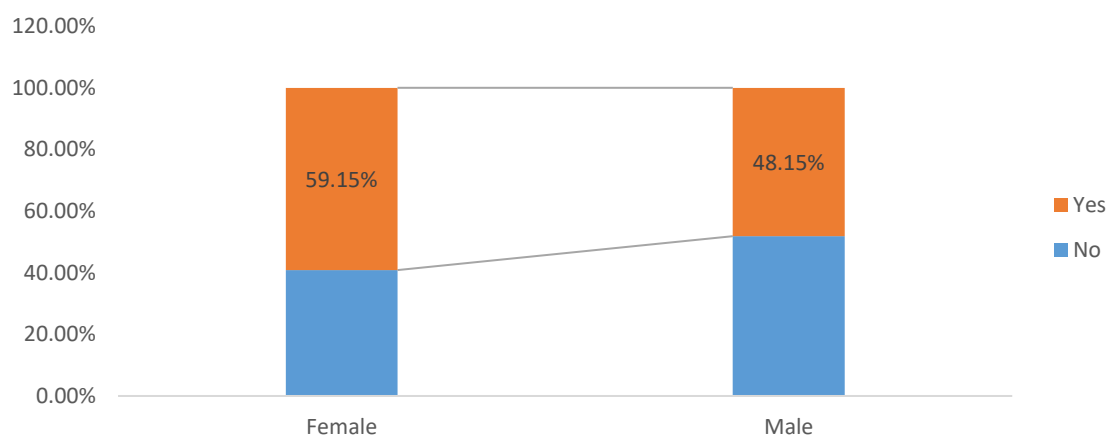
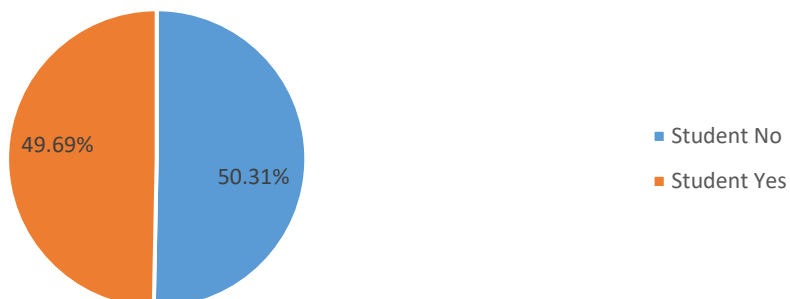


Social media platforms typically host groups based on various user interests, including study groups. These groups connect students with their classmates and tutors. As shown in **Figure 7**, students find these SM groups to be beneficial for their studies. I have been the member of five study groups at the village level related to research field. I found these studies groups helpful to students in easy communication with teachers (**Figure 9**). It is also found that,

Figure 10 Using Social Media to Communicate With Teachers: Gender Wise Distribution



girls students are actively using the social media groups in comparison to boys, In the above **figure 10**, it is also observable.

Figure 11: Using Social Media for Reading News**Figure 12: Using Social Media for Reading News: Gender Wise Distribution****Figure 13: Total Students Using Social Media for Competitive Exams**

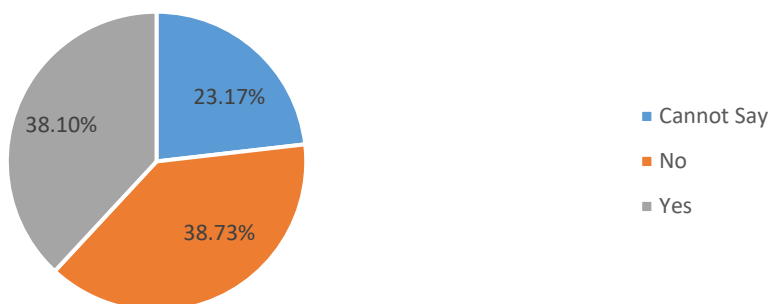
Concluding Observations: The data shows that SM benefits both learners and teachers by transforming communication in education. In the past, without SM and internet access, interactions were limited and largely confined within rural settings and between local teachers and students. Now, SM has blurred these boundaries, creating a more interconnected rural environment.

An examination of gender differences in education reveals that girls are more actively involved in educational activities, as illustrated in **Figures 6, 8, 10, and 12**. These trends contribute to the de-crystallization of the female private sphere, transforming the research field in liquid sphere.

Section (c)

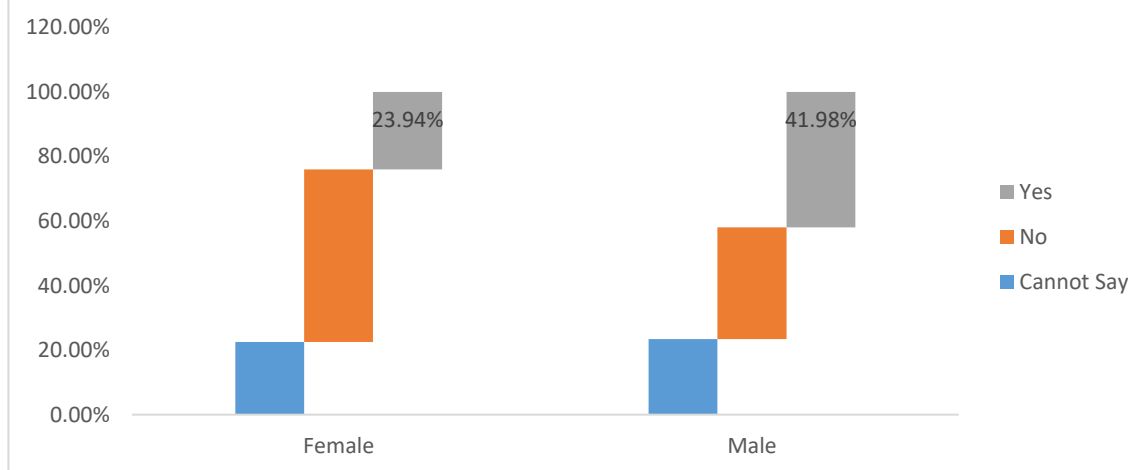
Youth and Emerging Liquid Sphere: This section discusses the emerging digital sphere impact on youth culture. It notes that increased SM usage is replacing traditional methods of asserting identity, such as carom-playing, traditional Gadka performances (Martial-Art), and sports in village society. Instead, youth are now engaging with platforms like online Ludo and sharing ideas and videos on SM.

Figure: 14 Using Social Media For Creating Identity

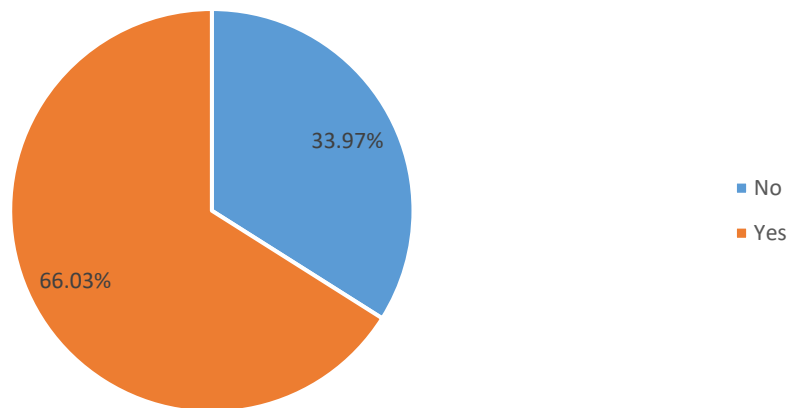


This shift marks a transition from physical to digital activism, allowing for new forms of interaction that blur the lines between private and public spheres in rural life and transforms the existing public sphere into a kind of liquid sphere.

Figure 15: Using Social Media for Creating Identity: Gender Wise Distribution



In the **figures: 14 and 15** it is apparent that SM is use is popular in many ways among youth. Such many ways are reflected in sharing pictures, sharing new ideas and just for funny sharing.

Figure 16: Using Social Media for Sharing Pictures

their identity. Assertion of identity may be fulfilled through various ways easiest way for such purpose is sharing of the pictures on social media platforms. In the above **figure 16**, 66.03 per cent SM users are agree for using SM for the purpose of sharing the pictures.

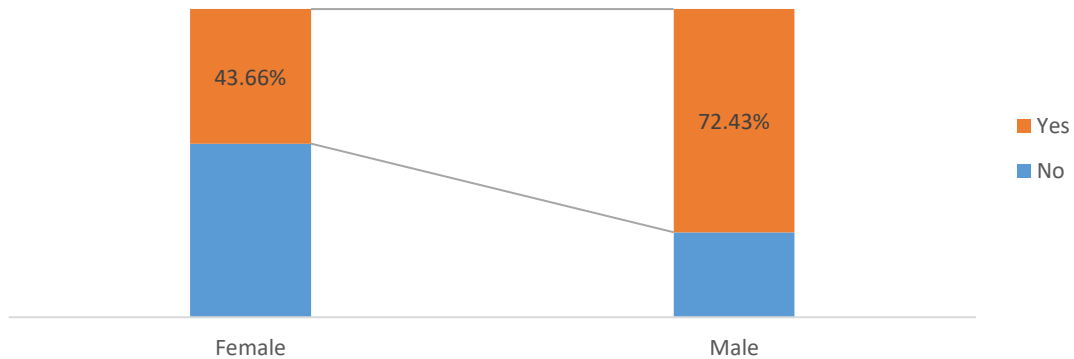
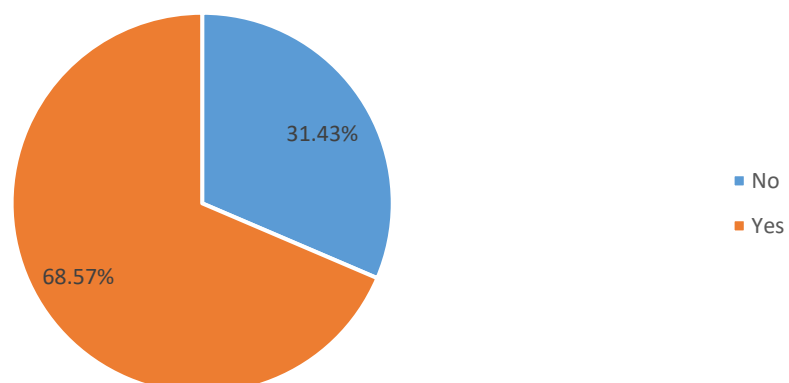
Figure 17: Using Social Media for Sharing Pictures: Gender Wise Distribution**Figure 18: Using Social Media for Funny Sharing**

Figure 19: Using Social Media for Funny Sharing:Gender Wise Distribution

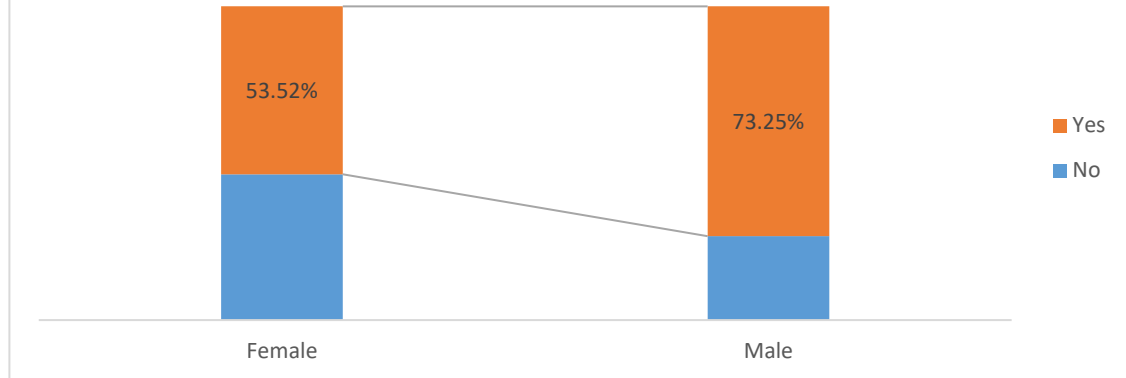


Figure 20: Using Social Media to Share New Ideas

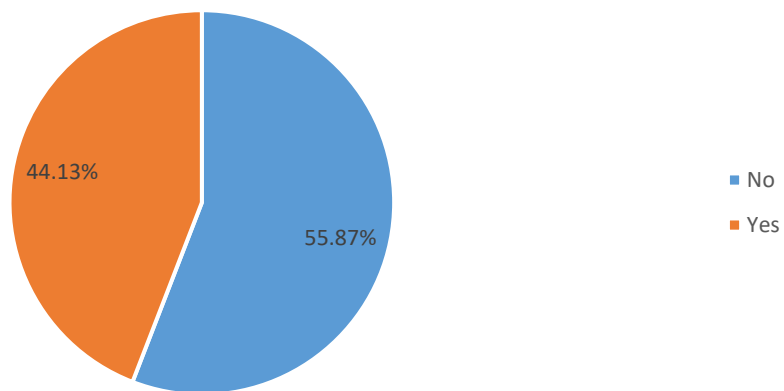
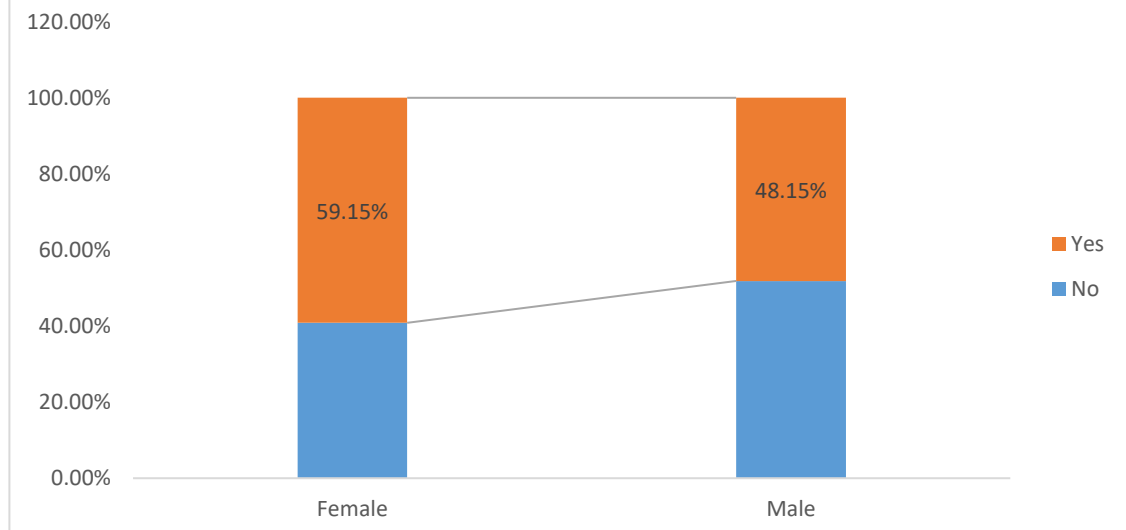


Figure 21: Using Social Media to Share New Ideas: Gender Differentials



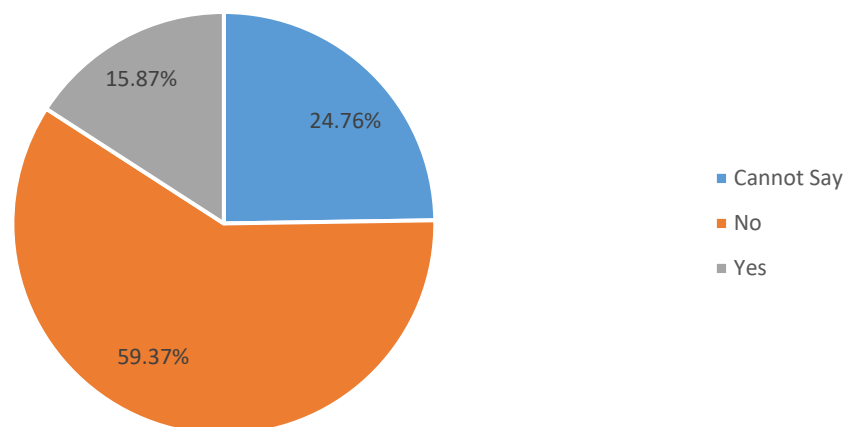
However, between the age group 20-25 it is highest. It reflected that age is the significant indicator of SM use. In the above **figures 15, 17, 19** related to gender differentials continue to reveal that the female has less participation. The **figure 21** showing the comparatively higher participation of the female. Apart from the data quantification **case studies** from tuition centre helpful in understanding the changing social space. The local tuition centers provide insight into participation. At a tuition center near 'Bhulla Mor', most girls used their parents' mobile devices but were not allowed to bring them to class. In another center, girls in 8th and 9th grades used SM with restrictions, while a 7th-grade boy accessed SM under strict parental monitoring. These cases reveal the impact of age-related social norms that inhibit free mobile phone use among adolescents, emphasizing that age is a critical factor in participation in SMPs.

Concluding Observations: The qualitative and quantitative data highlight SM use among rural youth in Murshidabad, where cultural changes are evident in dressing patterns, ways of speech, sleeping pattern, and occupations. These shifts reflect a growing similarity to global lifestyles, driven by continuous idea exchange between the digital sphere and rural life, transforming it into a more fluid environment. However, certain traditions persist, limiting women's participation in SM and restricting adolescents, especially those under 13, due to lower mobile device ownership.

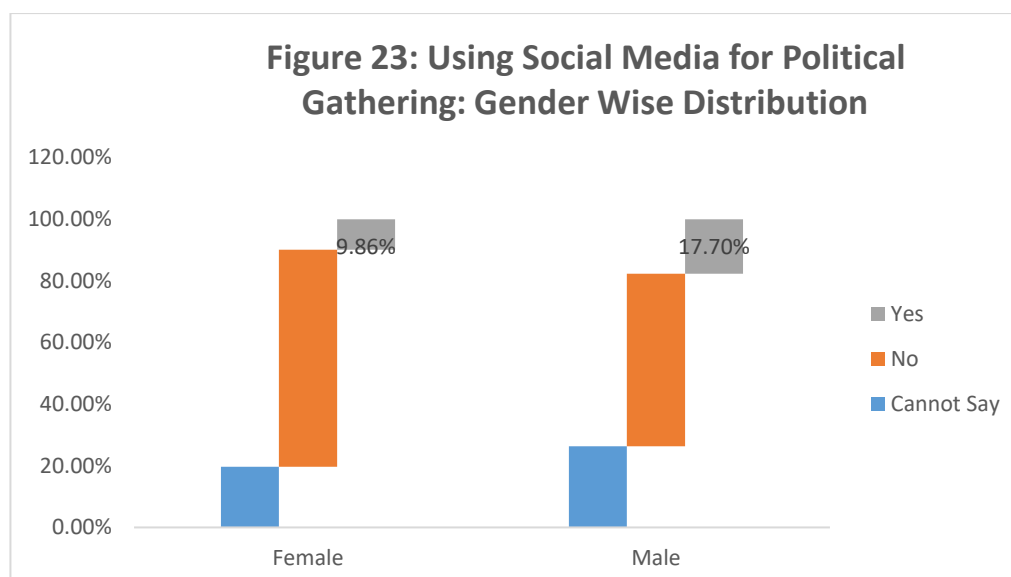
Section (d)

Social Media Use and Political Participation: This section discusses the use of SM for political purposes, particularly in rural areas. Traditionally, rural society engaged in factional politics linked to land ownership, which created a static political landscape (Srinivas, 1976) (Chakravarti, 1976). However, land reforms redistributed land among multiple families, leading to feuds and the rise of new socio-political classes, with 'Bargadars' claiming status as Zamindars (Bhattacharya & Kumar, 1979). As SM began to permeate rural Murshidabad, the political landscape shifted from faction-based to state-centric politics. Political leaders leveraged SM to mobilize youth and facilitate direct communication with district administrations, which enabled community development initiatives. This resulted in the youth becoming tools for political leadership, closely connected to mainstream politics, thereby transforming a once rigid political sphere into a more fluid one. Quantitative data on the political use of SM shows that only about 15% of users engage with it for political gatherings, while over 59% do not. This low engagement can be attributed to the sample's age range (14-30) and their diverse SM habits, which often disguise their political activities. Attempts to identify politically active youth can yield negative outcomes, so only visibly active users were targeted in the research.

Figure 22: Using Social Media for attending Political Gathering



Gender differentials in the **figure 23** also reflected the differences over the participation of both genders. The reasons for such differences already discussed in above sections; female participation is comparatively low in all aspects of emerging liquid sphere except education.



Above data quantification further corroborated with the case studies which gives the significant insights about the changing public space. There are the two case which reflected the impact of rising use of SM and its impact upon rural society. These two case studies are from Khanpur village.

In the case of the Rumour Night: Following the anti-CAA protests across India, a similar rumour emerged in Khanpur village and surrounding areas. This rumor pertained to an anticipated violence against both communities. The residents of Khanpur village and nearby regions were greatly concerned about their safety. After several hours, some police officials arrived in the village and declared that there was no such situation, as they had been misinformed via SM.

Regarding the Anti-CAA protests: A few months later, when nationwide protests erupted against the CAA legislation, the villagers also took part in organizing protests. These protests were aligned with the larger national movement and adhered to the anti-CAA ideology.

Both instances illustrate that the prevailing socio-political narratives are affecting rural areas at a pace comparable to that found in urban settings. This political environment has been enabled by the utilization of SM. Additionally, this indicates that the rural lifeworld is no longer a stable construct; rather, this once rigid and less changeable is starting to experience fragmentation and is evolving into a more liquid sphere.

Concluding Observations: Based on the qualitative and quantitative observations discussed earlier, it can be stated that the socio-political dynamics in the village are shaped by dominant political narratives. These shifts contrast with the traditional framework of village society, where local political authority was mainly determined by land ownership and caste hierarchies. The changing aspects of politics in rural society revealed the changing social space from 'isolated-whole' to liquid sphere.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that, use of SM has expanded to rural inhabitants and has affected the rural society. Previously, the village society was considered "isolated-whole", but the utilization of the SM has brought significant changes to village life. Changes includes benefits to SM users relating to work and daily activities and for some users excessive engagements on SM brings socio-economic impairments. Selected case studies and data quantification revealed that, in recent years utilization of SM in social life has replaced the patterns of interaction from face to face to digital networks. IncurSION of the digital networks in social life affected many facets of life such as entertainment, social bonding, patterns of amusement, digital activism among youth and political participation. All such drastic changes has transformed public sphere into a liquid life. Such findings may be further aligned with the existing theories. These theories has many similarities with findings in the research. Habermas' explains that the public-sphere is open for all. In contrast of the public-sphere the concept of private sphere is the space where individuals having own idea, such as the family space. The other theory which is used in the interpretations of the data is Bauman's concept of liquid life. He explained because of the increasing use of information technology the contemporary society become liquid society because people can connect at multiple levels without moving from their space. Reading on both theories indicated that, public sphere in the research field has become liquid sphere because of utilization of SM. In the research field traditional notions of private and public sphere has become blurred and indicating the transformation of public sphere into liquid sphere.

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