The role of social media in engaging young people in environmental issues

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Abstract. Social media is a privileged information medium for political and public actors due to the ease of participation and interaction it offers. These new media can promote both political and societal mobilization among citizens. Which is particularly important in addressing environmental issues and achieving sustainable development goals. To this end, Morocco has emphasized in its new development model the importance of involving all stakeholders, including young people, in environmental initiatives to ensure a green transition. This prompted us to question the role of social media in engaging young people in environmental issues. For this purpose, we opted for a quantitative survey, focusing on the #b7arblaplastic operation organized by the Mohamed VI Foundation for Environmental Protection, which literally translates to "plastic-free beach". This initiative primarily targets young people. Our study revealed that our sample group is concerned about environmental issues and follows environmental news, mainly through social media. However, our study has shown that not all of participants were aware of the #b7arblaplastic operation. While the Foundation did use social media to reach out to young people, only a small percentage of participants saw the hashtag circulating on these platforms. This leads us to conclude that it's not enough to simply use social media, it is also essential to know how to effectively leverage them to reach our target audience. Hence the need for a well-thought-out, relevant communications strategy. This will not only allow political and public actors to dematerialize their communications and reduce their environmental impact, but also enable them to involve and mobilize youth, through a means of communication with which they are familiar.

Keywords — social media, youth, engagement, environmental issues.

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1 Introduction

Social media is on the rise. With the democratization of the digital realm, traditional media has lost its monopoly[1]. Social media has become a favored means of communication for political and public figures to reach their target audience, especially the youth. These new media indeed enhance the participation of all citizens in political and public life, thus addressing inclusion issues[2]. That being said, social media serves as a tool for both political and societal mobilization of citizens. In the case of political engagement, citizens' involvement is often used to further the electoral interests of politicians[3]. As for societal mobilization, it can be utilized to engage citizens in issues such as environmental protection. Indeed, environmental protection requires the mobilization of two stakeholders: citizens and governments. In democracies, individuals can exert pressure on their leaders to adopt climate-friendly measures[4]. On the other hand, public actors can also raise public awareness of certain environmental issues, within the context of citizen communication. In both cases, social media can be called upon. Especially considering that these new media platforms facilitate information sharing and the expression of diverse opinions[5]. They can thus be leveraged for a noble cause: the environment. Given the growing environmental challenges, the younger generation is the one that will experience the grim consequences of current environmental issues like climate change. In fact, they are stakeholders who must be taken into account in the fight to protect the environment[6].

In Morocco, the General Directorate of Meteorology is responsible for publishing a report on the state of the climate in Morocco. In the report on the state of the climate in 2022, published in 2023, it is stated that 2022 was the hottest year ever recorded in Morocco in over 40 years. Also, the 2021-2022 agricultural season was the driest in at least 40 years. The same year witnessed wildfires that caused significant damage and losses. These forest fires were exacerbated by rising temperatures and a heatwave during the summer[7]. The climate situation is alarming, and this is what is prompting the Kingdom to mobilize various stakeholders at different levels to combat environmental problems. Indeed, Morocco's new development model relies on this approach to ensure a green transition that promotes a more environmentally friendly lifestyle for Moroccans. Moroccan youth are thus at the heart of this transition[8]. This is what prompted us to pose the fundamental research question: What is the role of social media in engaging youth in environmental issues?

The objective of our research is to determine if social media plays a central role in environmental initiatives targeting youth and, if so, to what extent they succeed in mobilizing young people. This will enable us to conciliate new media and environmental issues within the context of a study, in order to understand how these social media platforms, highly favored by young people, can serve as a vehicle for mobilization and change.

2 Methodology

To address our research question, we conducted a quantitative survey using an online questionnaire targeted at users of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The choice of a quantitative survey was not arbitrary. It allowed us to primarily ask participants multiple-choice questions and closed-ended questions. To achieve our objective, a quantitative survey was conducted through an online questionnaire. For our case study, we focused specifically on the 4th edition of the #b7arblaplastic campaign, which literally means “plastic-free beach” This campaign, aimed at young people, was launched by the Mohammed VI Foundation for the Protection of the Environment during the summer of 2023 and ran throughout the summer season.

The first step of this study was data collection. We launched the survey on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which are among the most widely used social networks. According to Data reportal, an online platform providing reports and data on digital trends, digital and social media usage in over 230 countries and territories worldwide, Facebook is the most widely used platform by Moroccans in 2023, followed by Instagram[9].

The questionnaire used in the survey was launched in July 2023. It took us 2 months to gather all data needed for our study.

For more effective data collection, we opted for Sphinx survey software. We chose this software due to its user-friendly question organization, customizable question presentation based on previous answers, and the ability to generate tailored data analysis. However, we chose to present our data using the visme.co platform, which allows us to present data in the form of customized graphs and illustrations.

Our questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, the majority of which were closed-ended or multiple-choice questions. This questionnaire, distributed to users of three social networks, allowed us to collect relevant and sufficient responses to answer our research question. Internet users from different cities were targeted in this quantitative study. The average age of our sample was 30 years. Here is an overview of the socio-demographic results of our study. Our sample consisted of 60% women and 40% men. The colored regions on the map represent the regions covered by the survey (**Fig.1 and 2**).

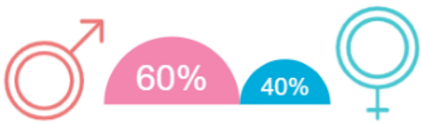

Fig.1. Percentage of participants by gender.

Fig.2. Demographic background of participants.

We have selected the most important questions from our survey for our study (**Fig.3**)

Number	Question
1	Do you care about the environmental issues in the country?
2	Do you follow the environmental news in the country?
3	Through which means do you follow it?
4	Which social media platforms do you use the most?
5	The Mohammed VI Foundation for the Protection of the Environment launched the 4th edition of its #b7arblaplastic campaign this summer, which extends throughout the summer season. Do you know this foundation?

6	How did you hear about it?
7	To better reach young people, who are the priority target, #b7arblaplastic used social networks. Have you ever heard of this campaign?
8	Through what means of communication?
9	Have you seen the hashtag #b7arblaplastic circulating on social networks, particularly Facebook and Instagram?
10	Do you know of any other environmental campaigns or operations that involve young people?
11	Do you think that a good communication strategy on social media can encourage you to take an interest in operations and campaigns organized to protect the environment?

Fig.3. The questions that have been selected for our study.

3 Results

In response to the first question regarding the concern of young people for the environment, 100% of the participants expressed interest in environmental issues in Morocco (**Fig.4**).

Fig.4. Percentage of participants interested in environmental issues.

In fact, with the environmental challenges we are witnessing, such as climate change, water scarcity, and pollution, it has become increasingly difficult to remain indifferent to environmental news. Moreover, international alarm bells have already been sounded. For the second question, 72% of the participants stated that they follow the environmental news of the country (**Fig.5**).

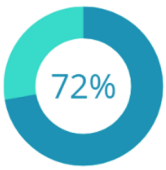

Fig.5. Percentage of participants who follow environmental news.

We can deduce from these two results that our sample has a genuine interest in the environment, which is a positive indicator and a good starting point for our study.

Among those interested in the country's environmental news, when asked how they follow it, social media emerged as the primary information channel, with 37% of participants using these platforms. Television followed with 30%, online press with 16%, radio with 12%, and print media with 5% (**Fig.6**).

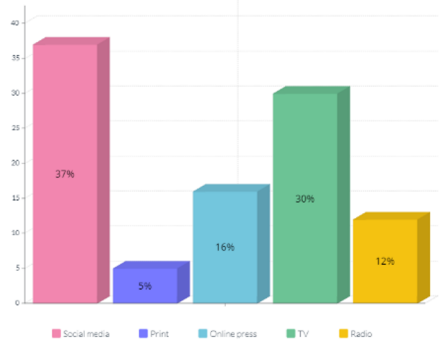

Fig.6. Percentage of each medium used by participants to follow environmental news.

This result indicates that our sample, composed of young people, considers social media as an information channel. These new media platforms are not just for entertainment but also serve as sources of information. As mentioned earlier, traditional media no longer holds a monopoly, and social media has become a prominent player in the information landscape.

To find out which social media platforms were most used among our sample, participants were asked which new media they use the most. Facebook came first with a percentage of 25%, followed by Instagram with a percentage of 24%, then YouTube with a percentage of 21%. In 4th place comes LinkedIn with a percentage of 20%. TikTok occupies 5th position with a percentage of 7%, then in last place comes Twitter with a percentage of 3% (**Fig.7**).

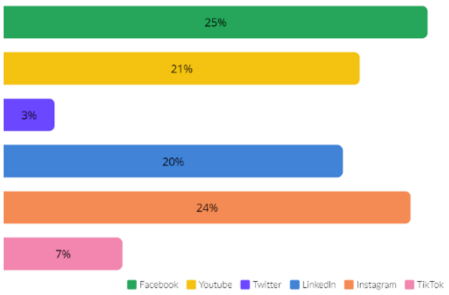

Fig.7. Percentage of each social network used by participants.

This result aligns with the data from Datareportal, which ranked Facebook as the most widely used platform by Moroccans in 2023, followed by Instagram. In the fifth question, we asked our participants if they are familiar with the Mohammed VI Foundation for the Protection of the Environment, which initiated the #b7arblaplastic campaign. 52% of participants confirmed that they were aware of the Foundation, while 48% had never heard of it (**Fig.8**).

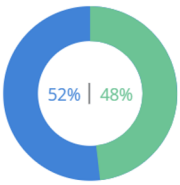

Fig.8. Acquaintance with Mohamed VI Foundation: Participants responses.

For the 52% of people who do know about the Foundation, we asked them how they found out about it. 39% knew the Foundation through television, followed by social media at 23%, radio at 17%, electronic press at 13%, and print media at 8% (**Fig.9**).

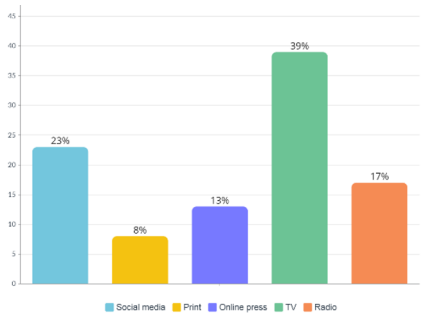

Fig.9. Percentage of each means through which participants knew about the Foundation.

We can deduce from this result that television remains a ubiquitous communication medium, with news coverage on environmental topics being constant. As a current event, the #b7arblaplastic campaign was also featured in news broadcasts, contributing to its visibility. The lower ranking of social media could be explained by the Foundation's communication strategy, which may not be very social network-oriented. Since our participants are active on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, it's important for the Foundation to put more effort into boosting its presence and visibility on these platforms. In the seventh question, we asked our participants if they had heard about the #b7arblaplastic campaign by the Mohammed VI Foundation. Only 44% of our sample confirmed that they were aware of this campaign (**Fig.10**), even though the Foundation used social media to promote its operation and target young people.

Fig.10. Percentage of participants who heard about the #b7arblaplastic campaign.

With this result, we can confirm that the Foundation's communication strategy may need improvement, to boost the visibility of its operations among young people. We then asked these 44% of our participants how they heard about this operation. Television came in 1st place with a percentage of 60%, followed by social networks with a percentage of 33% and then radio with a percentage of 7% (**Fig.11**).

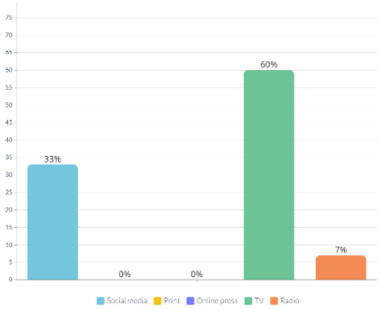

Fig.11. Percentage of each means through which participants knew about the #b7arblaplastic campaign.

In the 9th question, we asked our participants if they had seen the hashtag #b7arblaplastic circulating on Facebook and Instagram, the two social networks used by the Foundation to promote its campaign. Only 28% of participants confirmed having seen the hashtag, while 72% had not (**Fig.12**).

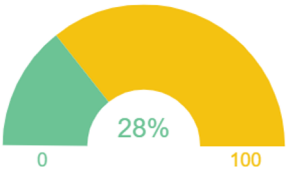

Fig.12. Percentage of participants who had seen the hashtag #b7arblaplastic circulating on social media.

This result sheds light on why participants who were familiar with the campaign primarily knew about it through TV. While the Foundation did use Facebook and Instagram to reach young people, the campaign still lacked visibility, possibly due to its communication strategy, as we could deduce earlier.

In the 10th question, we asked our participants if they are aware of other environmental campaigns or initiatives involving young people. 92% responded no (**Fig.13**).

Fig.13. Percentage of participants unaware of other youth environmental initiatives.

We can see that the vast majority of participants were unable to identify an environmental campaign or initiative targeting young people, despite several initiatives being deployed in this regard. For example, the CLIMTNA awareness caravan for climate change, initiated by the European Union and a Moroccan private radio station, and which began in April 2023. This campaign primarily targeted young people.

To find out whether the #b7arblaplastic operation did not gain visibility due to the Foundation's social media communication strategy or if it is because young people require something other than social media to become interested in environmental initiatives, we asked our participants in the 11th question if an effective communication strategy would make them more interested in and inclined to follow environmental campaigns and operations. 84% responded affirmatively, while 16% responded negatively (**Fig.14**).

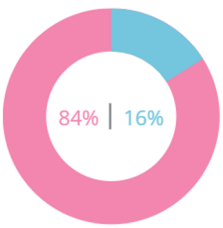

Fig.14. Percentage of belief in the influence of social media communication on environmental engagement.

We can deduce that if the #b7arblaplastic campaign, which we used as an example, did not reach a maximum number of young people, it is not because it lacked relevance but rather because the communication strategy employed failed in boosting the visibility and the reach of this campaign among young people.

That said, implementing environmental initiatives is a positive step, but it would be even more effective if the involved parties work on their digital communication, especially in a society that has become increasingly interconnected. Social media plays a significant role in engaging young people in environmental issues and initiatives. The key is knowing how to harness these new media effectively. To do so, it is essential to establish a relevant and well-thought-out communication strategy.

4 Discussion

Social media has become a significant and influential platform in today's society, often referred to as the "fifth estate." Many political and public figures leverage these new media platforms to reach their target audiences and amplify their messages.

In Morocco, the significance of digital platforms has become increasingly evident, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital presence of political and public figures experienced significant growth during the pandemic and the 2021 legislative elections[10]. For instance, Ministries that deal with environmental issues, such as the Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development and the Ministry of Equipment and Water, have a presence on social media. The first ministry is active on YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn, in addition to its website. The second ministry is present on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, besides its website. As highlighted in the literature review, social media serves as a means of both political mobilization and societal engagement of citizens. Therefore, social media can be harnessed to support environmental protection initiatives and, in the process, engage young people. This aligns with Morocco's new development model, which emphasizes the importance of involving all stakeholders, including young people, in the green transition it aspires to achieve.

The use of social media seems obvious, especially since young people are not only increasingly connected but also use social networks as a source of information. In fact, our participants stated that they primarily follow environmental news through social media. Additionally, Moroccan citizens are increasingly adopting a digital culture. According to Datareportal, in January 2023, Morocco recorded an internet penetration rate of 88.1%, which increased by 1% compared to the previous year. Regarding social media, Morocco recorded 56.6% of its active population on these platforms[9]. Furthermore, media virality is conditioned by the willingness of receiving citizens to make an event go viral, as well as by the internet communication infrastructure[11].

Despite this high digital connectivity, when we questioned our participants about the #b7arblaplastic campaign, those who were unaware of it were slightly more numerous than those who knew about it. Additionally, few internet users saw this hashtag circulating on Facebook and Instagram, even though the Foundation used these platforms to promote its campaign. This leads to the conclusion that while using social media is an advantage, having an effective communication strategy is even more crucial. Such a strategy should be tailored to the target audience to ensure the desired results. Especially since, in a context where traditional media have begun to lose public trust[12], social networks have become a highly sought-after and viral means of communication. Moreover, with the public increasingly turning to online sources for information, media outlets have had to adapt to this shift in order

to keep the public informed and engaged[13]. On their part, organizations and institutions must also harness the virality enabled by these new technologies to gain communicative advantages. In fact, when we asked our participants whether a good digital communication strategy could help them follow environmental campaigns and initiatives, the majority responded affirmatively. This result underscores the importance of using social media strategically.

The environment is a global concern, and Morocco is no exception. Nationally, various awareness campaigns and initiatives are deployed to mitigate the environmental impact of human activity. For instance, during the religious festival Eid El Adha, whose rituals generate significant waste[14], or in the summer, to protect beaches from pollution. Interestingly, despite the focus on involving young people in most of these campaigns, the majority of our participants were unaware of them.

Consider the awareness-raising caravan "CLIMTNA" for combating climate change, for example. This caravan primarily targeted young people, with around 1,000 youths participating in its activities and approximately 1,650 kilograms of waste collected thanks to their involvement. The program and activities of the caravan were widely disseminated on the social media channels of the European Union and through audiovisual content[15].

It is evident that several efforts are being made at the national level to protect the environment and involve young people in the process. Social media can be effectively mobilized for this purpose, provided they are well-coordinated. Furthermore, these new media platforms also contribute to environmental well-being by allowing the dematerialization of communication strategies, reducing reliance on paper-based materials that have a significant environmental impact[16]. For instance, the paper industry generates harmful gases that contribute to climate change[17].

In conclusion, our research methodology has allowed us to achieve our initial objectives. The data and figures we have incorporated have supported our findings regarding the importance of digital platforms in citizen mobilization for environmental issues. However, one limitation of our study is that we did not delve deeper into the digital communication strategy of the Foundation. Investigating this aspect further could have provided greater insight into the communication gap. Nevertheless, since our study focused on the relationship between social media and the environment, future research could explore this topic more comprehensively, highlighting various aspects that demonstrate how social media can serve environmental causes.

5 Conclusion

Social media platforms serve as a means for various actors to reach connected youth, thanks to their user-friendliness and immediacy. While these new media are often deployed by political actors to achieve their electoral goals, they can also be used to promote societal issues such as the environment and even mobilize citizens. This has led us to question the role of social media in engaging young people in environmental issues, especially given that Morocco's new development model emphasizes the involvement of youth in its green transition. Engaging young people in environmental issues is crucial, as it teaches them to use resources thoughtfully, ensuring they do not harm future generations. Youth are the future of any country and have the potential to drive significant changes and transformations that ensure a sustainable future. To this end, several environmental campaigns and initiatives are deployed nationally to raise awareness and educate young people about environmental issues. These initiatives use social media among other tools to gain visibility. The #b7arblaplastic

campaign, which we used as an example, utilized Facebook and Instagram. However, our participants who were unaware of it slightly outnumbered those who knew about it. Additionally, the vast majority of our participants had not seen this hashtag circulating on Facebook and Instagram. This led us to conclude that merely having a presence on social media is not enough without a relevant communication strategy to amplify the reach of these environmental initiatives. Our sample also affirmed that a good social media communication strategy would enhance their interest in environmental operations. That being said, these new media platforms are valuable assets that should not be overlooked. They have the potential to expand the reach of actions aimed at achieving sustainable development goals. To broaden the perspectives on this topic, we can delve more deeply, in our future work, into how to construct a relevant digital communication strategy that can serve the environmental goals of the stakeholders. This will enable us to examine in a more concrete and elaborated manner how social networks can be orchestrated to benefit the environment.

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