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Facebook as an Agent to Tackle Climate Change with Reference to University Students in Assam

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Abstract: ***The world is living in crucial times of climate change with an adverse impact on our planet. It is therefore vital for everyone to understand the implications of being ignorant of the causes of climate change. The need for increasing awareness is greater now than ever before, and the best means available for this is through extensive use of social media. The proliferation of social media tools in this information age is tremendous. The effect of popular social media platforms like Facebook and its patterns of usage by university students need to be investigated. The global outreach of various platforms of digital media is unparalleled. Social media could be a desirable platform to fight against all the odds in climate change. This study investigates the usage patterns of Facebook as an agent to tackle climate change amongst the university students in Assam. The study is exploratory in nature and executed through a quantitative research methodology. The data is collected by employing survey method with close ended questionnaire as its research tool. This study analyses the opinions drawn from 100 university students studying in various universities in Assam. The data has been taken through snowball sampling technique and measured with Likert Scale. It is pertinent to understand the level of awareness of the university going students about climate change. Perhaps, this is high time to analyse the usage patterns of Facebook by university students and spell out the rationale behind its effectiveness in fighting against climate change.***

Keywords: ***Awareness, Climate Change, Digital Media, Facebook, Information Age and Social Media.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Today's generation has been facing continuous threats of climate change and its impact is tremendous. In general parlance, climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, but since the 1800s, human activities have been the main drivers of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like, coal, oil, and gas, which produces heat-trapping gases. As greenhouse gas emissions blanket the Earth by trapping the sun's heat, thereby leading to global warming and climate change.

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The world is now warming faster than at any point in recorded history. The primary human activities of burning fossil fuels have fundamentally increased the concentration of greenhouse gases within the Earth's atmosphere and resulting in the warming up of our planet. Natural drivers, without human intervention, would push our planet toward a cooling period. Scientists attribute the global warming trend (observed since the mid-20th century) to the expansion of the greenhouse effect – due to which the atmosphere traps the heat radiating from the Earth. Certain gases in the atmosphere block heat from escaping. Long-lived gases that remain semi-permanently in the atmosphere and do not respond physically or chemically to changes in temperature are described as factors forcing climate change. Gases such as water vapour, that respond physically or chemically to changes in temperature, are seen as feedbacks. Warmer temperatures over time are changing weather patterns and disrupting the usual balance of nature. This poses many risks to human beings and all other forms of life on Earth. In fact everyone can help limit climate change. From the way we travel, to the electricity we use and the food we eat, we can make a difference. The topic of climate change has been widely discussed recently in different disciplines by researchers. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have given the opportunity, space and freedom for the common public to share information, ideas and opinions to tackle issues of climate change. Since the last decade, Facebook has been one of the most popular forms of soft power tools and methods for influencing social opinion. As such, it provides vast inputs for discussion and helps to increase awareness regarding the adverse impact of climate change among the youth (Mavrodieva, Rachman, Harahap & Shaw, 2019). This study aims to (1) Assess Facebook as a powerful platform to spread awareness on climate change, (2) Analyze its influence on the knowledge of students on climate change (3) Investigate whether increased public awareness could influence the students to engage more in bringing about changes related to climate change issues in society.

A. Awareness Campaign on Climate Change and Facebook

The first issue addressed in this study is on how to make students aware of climate change followed by an assessment of the awareness level of their own behaviour towards climate change. The students not only need to be aware of the subject but also need to be aware of the various ways in which they can respond to the related challenges. In order to persuade more people, the first thing a student needs is to have a clear story to tell with a very concrete action connected to it.

There is also a need for 'word of mouth' i.e., the need for social transmission, or social influence, to spread the message and increase awareness. According to Berger and his colleagues, to make a discussion more engaging, it should follow the Six Principles of Contagiousness, or STEPPS: Social currency (people share things that make them look good); Triggers (it is part of the users' everyday life and on top of their minds); Emotional resonance (when users care about something they share it with others); Public (the idea or product is built to show and built to grow); Practical value (people like to share practical or helpful information); and Storytelling (people tend to share stories, not information). Climate change campaigners should therefore focus on creating innovative and useful (effective) messages with an emotional undertone and a memorable story line. (Fernandez, et al 2016)

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

While initial researches on climate change communication were mainly focused on print media, such as news coverage of climate change and pro-environmental campaigns, scholars are now increasingly focusing on the role of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Social media platforms provide a space in three important domains of climate change communication, viz., (i) information, (ii) discussion, and (iii) mobilization (Jr, E.C., & N, 2017). This is where this paper intervenes the effect of social media on climate change communication and fills the yawning gaps in its patterns of using Facebook. It specifically explores the uses patterns of Facebook in environmental communication.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"Higher education students' perspectives of the relevance of the online social networking site Facebook to education" by Cohen, A (2011) of Walden University states that use of Facebook by students is rapidly increasing, but there are limited recommendations for universities to effectively integrate Facebook (FB) in their curriculum. This study evaluated the perceptions of higher education students on the relevance of FB to academics, how it facilitates student-faculty interaction and dissemination of educational information**.** These findings lead to the conclusion that institutions of higher education will need to monitor the importance of FB as its use continually evolves within specific student populations. This study can contribute to positive social change by providing empirical evidence to inform planning for specific applications in curriculum, student community building or extra-curricular activities.

Vu, H. T., Blomberg, M., Seo, H., Liu, Y., Shayesteh, F., & Do, H. V. (2021) in Social media and environmental activism: Framing climate change on Facebook by global NGOs published in the journal 'Science Communication' analyses that Facebook content produced by 289 global climate nonprofits from 18 countries. Thereby, investigates these NGOs' framing of climate change. According to Mavrodieva, A. V., Rachman, O. K., Harahap, V. B., & Shaw, R. (2019) in role of social media as a soft power tool in raising public awareness and engagement in addressing climate change. Even though it is difficult to assess the effects of social media as a soft power tool with certainty, there are visible links between social media and changing public perceptions, with the possibility of public opinion influencing political decision-making.

Anderson, A. A. (2017) in Effects of social media use on climate change opinion, knowledge, and behavior ,Oxford research encyclopedia of climate science has stated that early research on the relationship between social media use and its relationship to climate change opinion, knowledge, and behavior suggests several positive impacts. Social media encourages greater knowledge of climate change, mobilization of climate change activists, space for discussing the issue with others, and online discussions that frame climate change as a negative for society. According to Boykoff, M. (2020) in Digital cultures and climate change: 'Here and now' published on Journal of Environmental Media via digital cultures, creativity is expanding rather than retracting from the challenge of meeting people where they are on climate change in the twenty-first century. Amid signs of progress and hope, there is much more work to be done.

While individual behaviour change is considered a central strategy to mitigate climate change, public engagement is still limited. Aiming to raise awareness, and to promote behaviour change, governments and organisations are conducting multiple pro-environmental campaigns, particularly via social media, write Fernandez, M., Piccolo, L. S., Maynard, D., Wippoo, M., Meili, C., & Alani, H. (2016) in their research study on Talking Climate Change via Social Media: Communication, Engagement and Behaviour in Proceedings of the 8th ACM Conference on Web Science (pp. 85-94). As informed by Tandoc Jr, E. C., & Eng, N. (2017) in Climate change communication on Facebook, Twitter, Sina Weibo, and other social media platforms in Oxford research encyclopedia of climate science, understanding of social media's increasingly important role in climate change communication will benefit from a more holistic research approach that explores social media use in climate change communication across a variety of platforms, cultures, and media systems.

IV. GAP OF THE STUDY

There have been a lot of researches on the importance of digital media and Facebook on how it can be used effectively to disseminate information regarding climate change among people but this study reveals how to fill the gaps about the initiatives taken by the university students of Assam on spreading awareness of climate change. This paper also determines that Facebook can be used effectively for bringing a change in the environment. Therefore, it is pertinent for the youth to understand the importance of Facebook to tackle climate change. The study observes that there has been no research work conducted to find out the awareness or action taken by people on Facebook in the Northeast India per se, and Assam in particular, to spread awareness regarding environmental issues and climate change.

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Hence, this study is pivotal to make the students understand the use of popular digital platform, viz., Facebook in bringing a change in the mindset of the people regarding the issues related to saving the environment.

V. OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

- To investigate the perspective of the students in Assam in responding the issues on Climate Change,
- To assess the relevant information students gain through Facebook on Climate Change,
- To study the patterns of information students' communicated in spreading awareness on climate change in Facebook,
- To analyze the influence of Facebook messages in bringing changes in society for environmental issues from the opinions of the students

VI. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This study is an exploratory research and falls under quantitative research methodology. The survey method was employed to collect the primary data by using close ended questionnaire as a tool and responses were collected from 100 students pursuing various disciplines in the four universities of Assam. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Form by using snowball design. Random sampling was adopted and data was collected from amongst Facebook using university students. The data was measured with the help of Likert Scale. The samples are confined to the university students of Assam in the age group of 18-26 years. The questionnaire was designed to understand the awareness of university students on climate change through Facebook, and assess the importance of Facebook in disseminating valuable information. The respondents are from The Assam Royal Global University, Gauhati University, Tezpur University and Assam University, Silchar. This study also accesses secondary data from books, journals, periodicals and the internet.

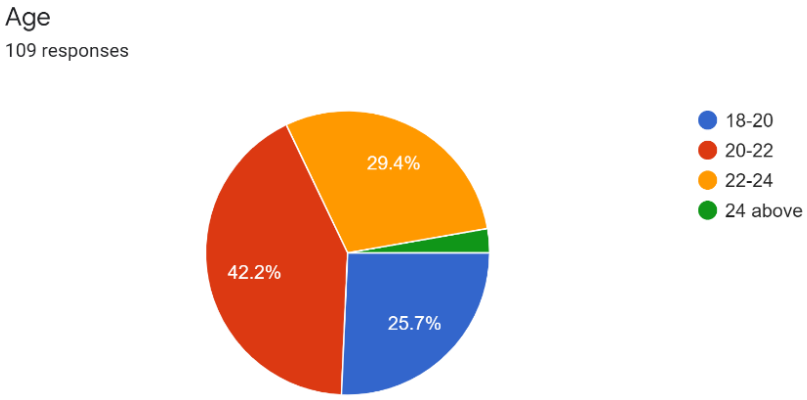

Diagram 1: Age Distribution of the Respondents

The above diagram shows the distribution of the respondents from the four universities of Assam. 25.7% of the respondents (university students) are in the age group of 18-20 years followed by 42.2% in the age group of 20-22 years and 29.4% from 22-24 years.

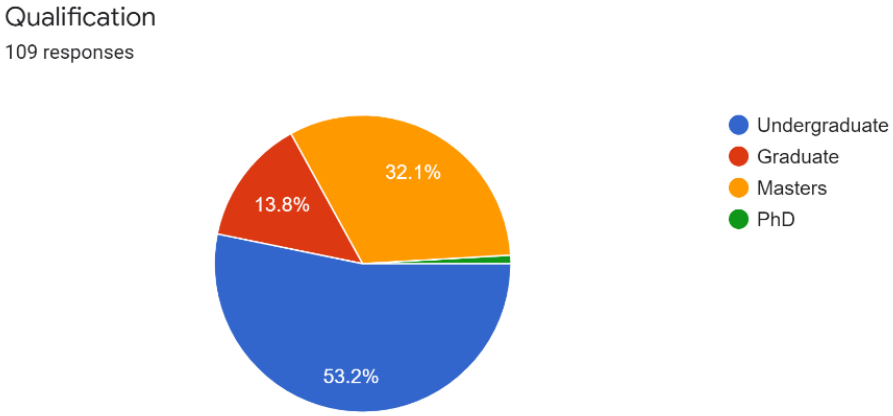

Diagram 2: Qualification Distribution of the Respondents

Diagram 2 displays the qualification of the respondents. 53.2% are undergraduates, 13.8% graduates, 32.1% Postgraduates and 1% are pursuing Ph.D.

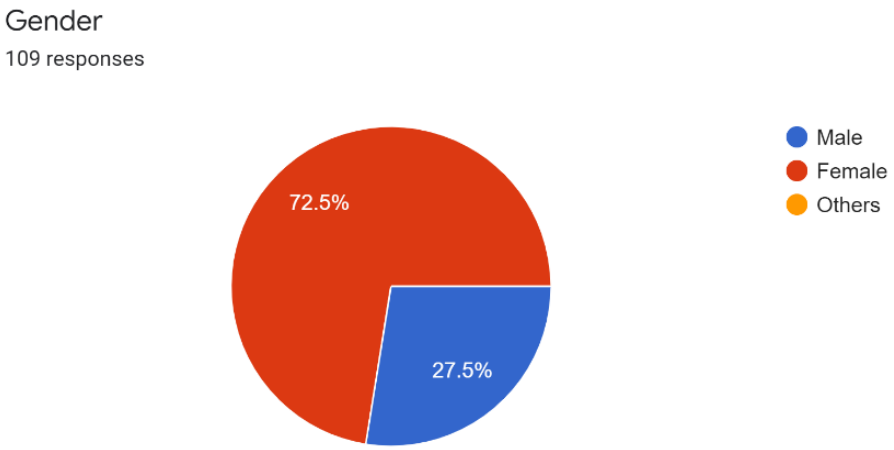

Diagram 3: Gender Distribution of the Respondents

Out of the 100 respondents, 27.5% were male and 72.5% were female students.

B. Descriptive Analysis of the Study

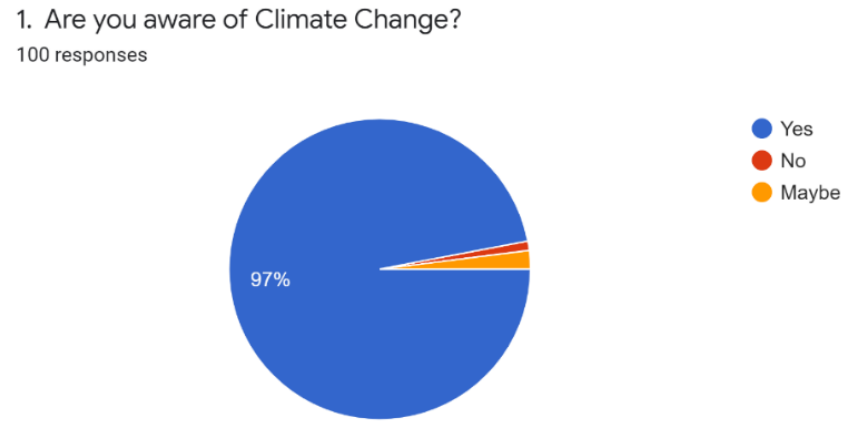

Diagram 4: Descriptive Analysis on Awareness about Climate Change

The above diagram shows that almost all the university students i.e., 97% are aware of Climate Change compared to a mere 1% who responded as not being aware. 2% responded as not sure to the question. The study concludes that almost all the respondents know about climate change.

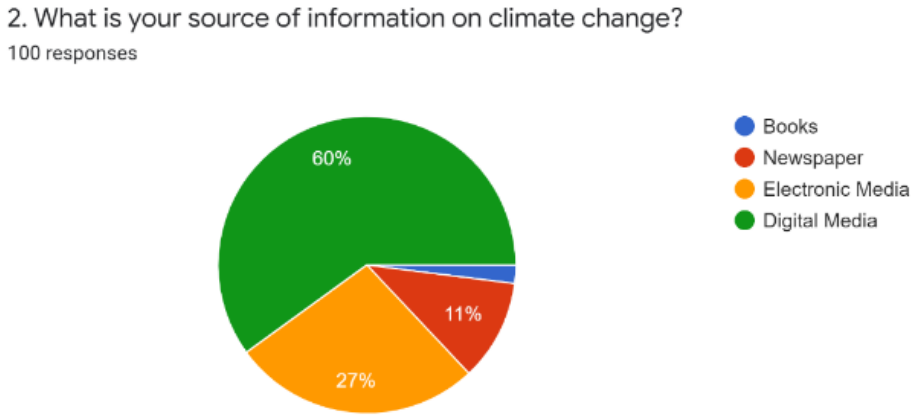

Diagram 5: Frequency distribution on Source of Information of Climate Change

The survey reveals that out of 100 respondents from the four universities in Assam, a majority (60%) sourced their information on Climate Change through Digital Media, while 27% from Electronic Media, followed by 11% from Newspapers and only 2% obtain information from books. This is a clear indication that the majority of the student community depends upon the digital media platforms i.e., the internet for information and knowledge on Climate Change.

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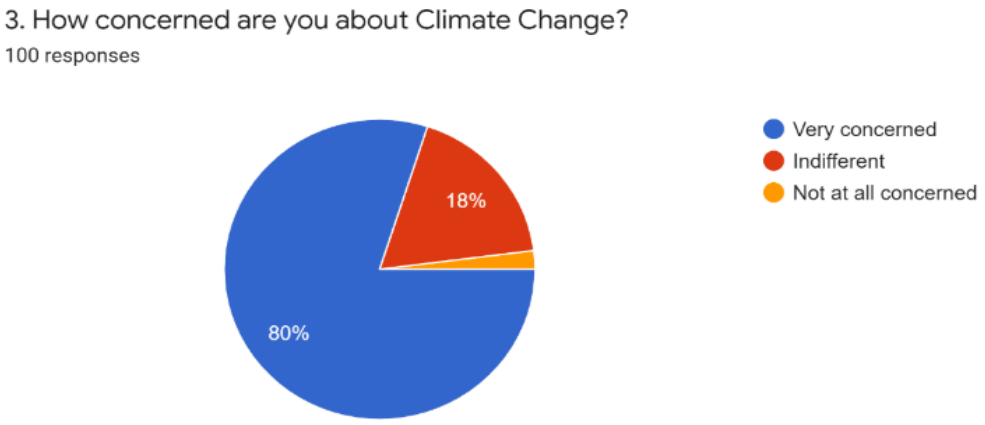

Diagram 6: Frequency distribution on Concern about Climate Change

The above analysis shows that the majority (80%) are "very concerned" about Climate Change which is an indication that they have been following the issue quite closely and are aware of its impact while 18% are "indifferent" to the factor and 2% are "not at all concerned".

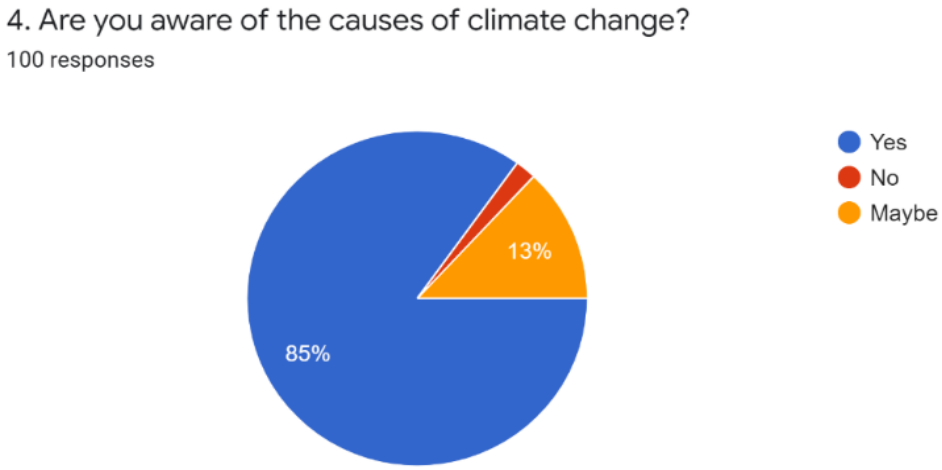

Diagram 7: Frequency distribution on Awareness about Causes of Climate Change

The study displays that a huge majority (85%) of university students are aware of the causes of Climate Change while 13% are not sure and 2% are not aware.

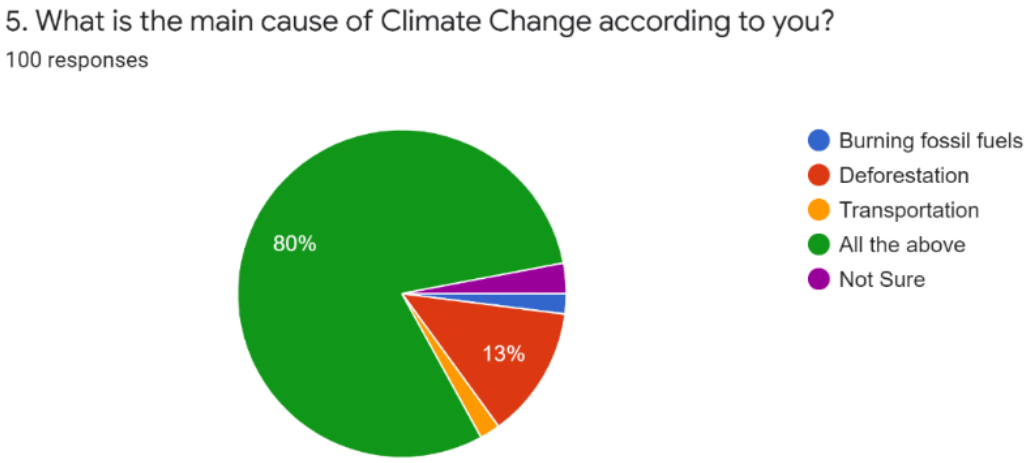

Diagram 8: Frequency distribution on the Main Cause of Climate Change

As evident from the pie-diagram, the majority 80% believes that all the factors listed above are the main causes of Climate Change, while 13% attribute the main cause to deforestation, 2% to burning fossil fuels, 2% to transportation and 3% responded as not being sure.

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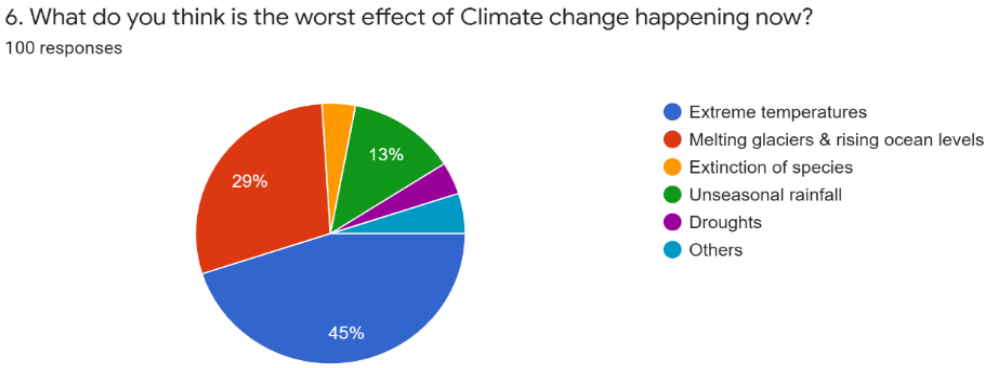

Diagram 9: Frequency distribution on the Worst Effect of Climate Change happening now

The given diagram shows that majority of the students (45%) feel that the worst effect of Climate Change happening now is extreme temperatures. 29% say it is the melting of glaciers and rising ocean levels while 13% chose unseasonal rainfall as the worst effect. In the opinion of 4%, the worst effect of climate change is extinction of species while 4% say that it is drought.

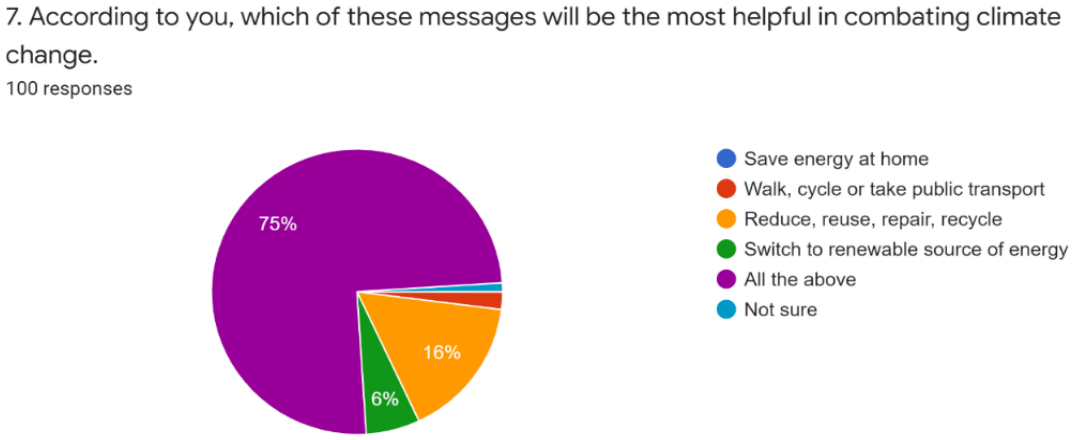

Diagram 10: Frequency distribution on messages helpful to combat Climate Change

The study observes that 2% students chose walking, cycling or taking public transport as the most helpful message to combat climate change. 6% opted for switching to renewable sources of energy while 16% think that reducing, reusing, repairing and recycling will be the most appealing. The majority 75% feel that all the messages listed above will be helpful in this mission. Only 1% students are not sure about the messages.

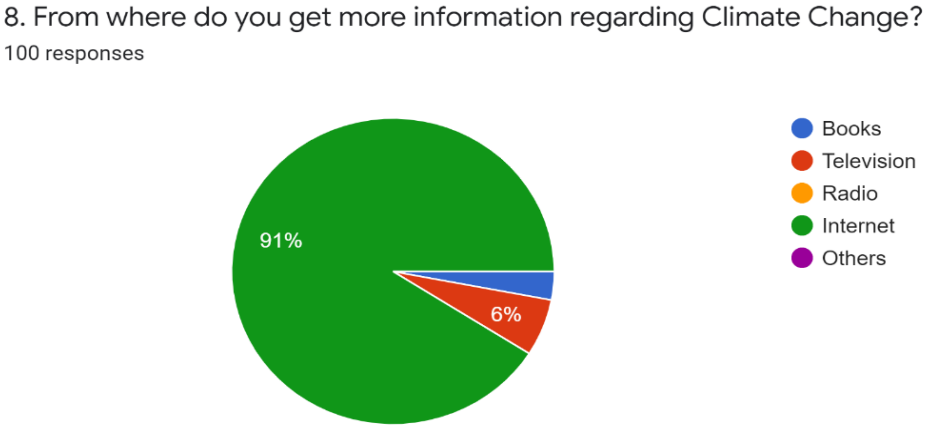

Diagram 11: Frequency distribution on sources of information on Climate Change

These responses are a corollary to the observations under diagram 2 given above. The majority 91% of the respondents have indicated that they get their information on issues of climate change from the internet (i.e., digital media), 6% from television (electronic media) and 3% from books (print). This is a clear indication about the critical role and acceptability of the internet over the other forms of media.

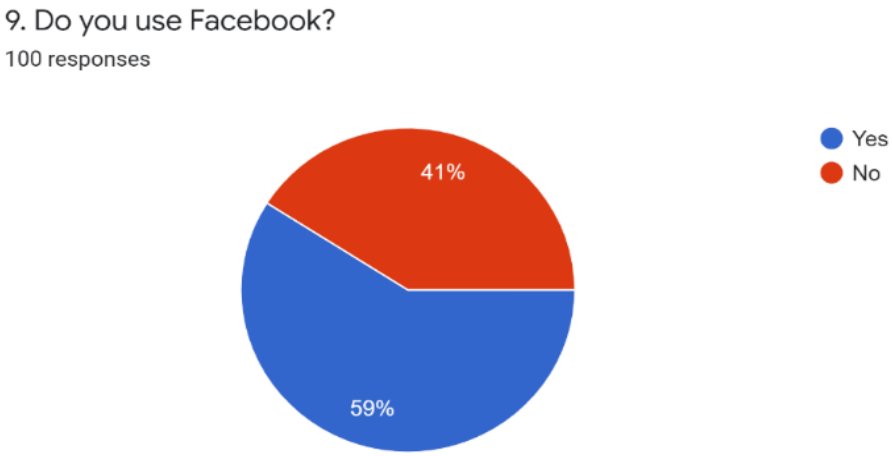

Diagram 12: Frequency distribution on Facebook users

The researcher observed that 59% students use Facebook while 41% don't. This points to their dependence on various other social media platforms also.

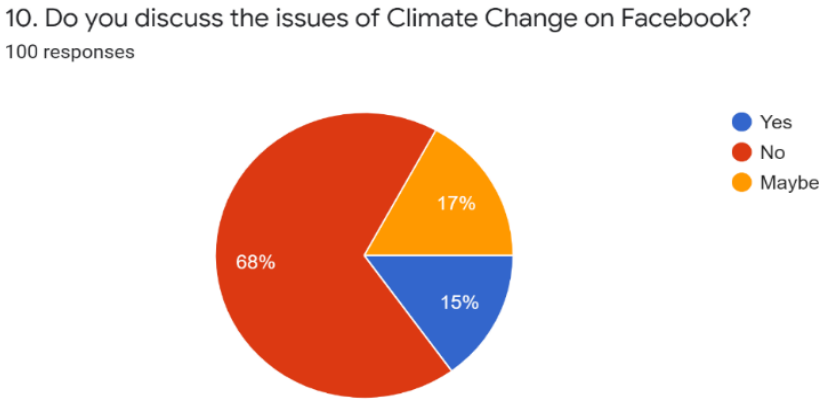

Diagram 13: Frequency distribution on discussions on Climate Change on Facebook

It was found that only 15% students discuss the issues of Climate Change on Facebook while the major chunk of 68% doesn't. This is an indication perhaps that Facebook isn't considered by them as an appropriate social media platform for discussing a serious issue like Climate Change. 17% are not sure.

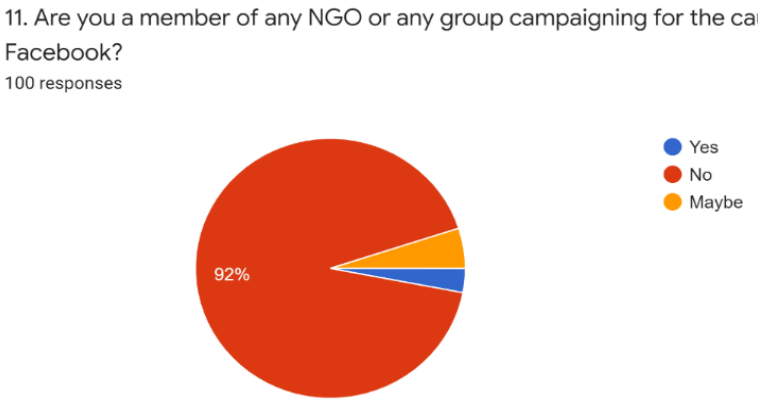

Diagram 14: Frequency distribution on groups campaigning for the cause of Climate Change on Facebook

Diagram 14 shows that a huge majority of respondents (92%) are not members of any NGO or group campaigning for the cause of Climate Change on Facebook. Only a mere 2% belong to some group or NGO campaigning for the cause.

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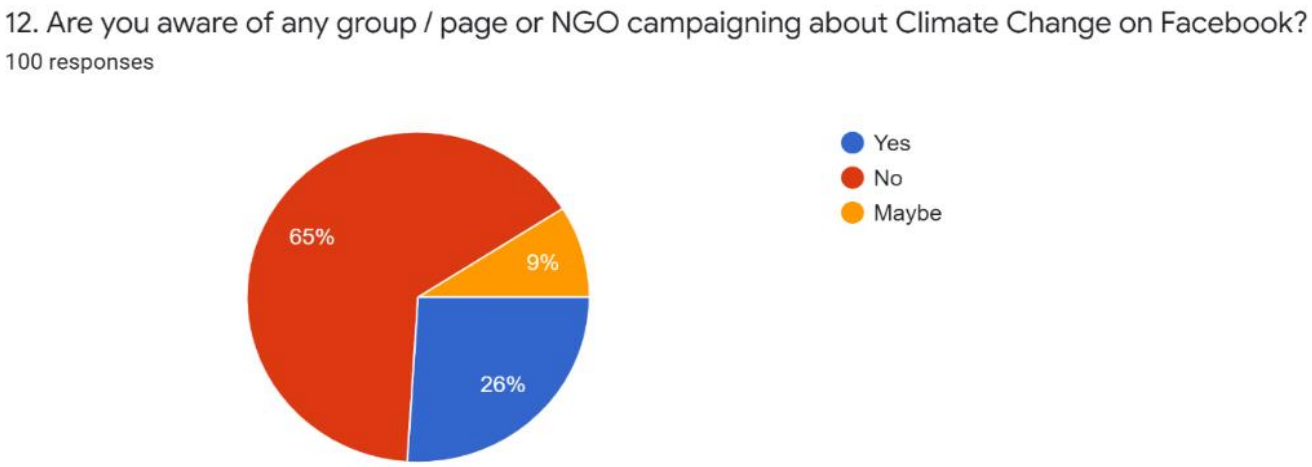

Diagram 15: Frequency distribution on awareness of Groups/Pages campaigning about Climate Change on Facebook

26% students are aware of some group, page or NGO campaigning for Climate Change on Facebook. The majority of 65% students are unaware and 9% are not sure.

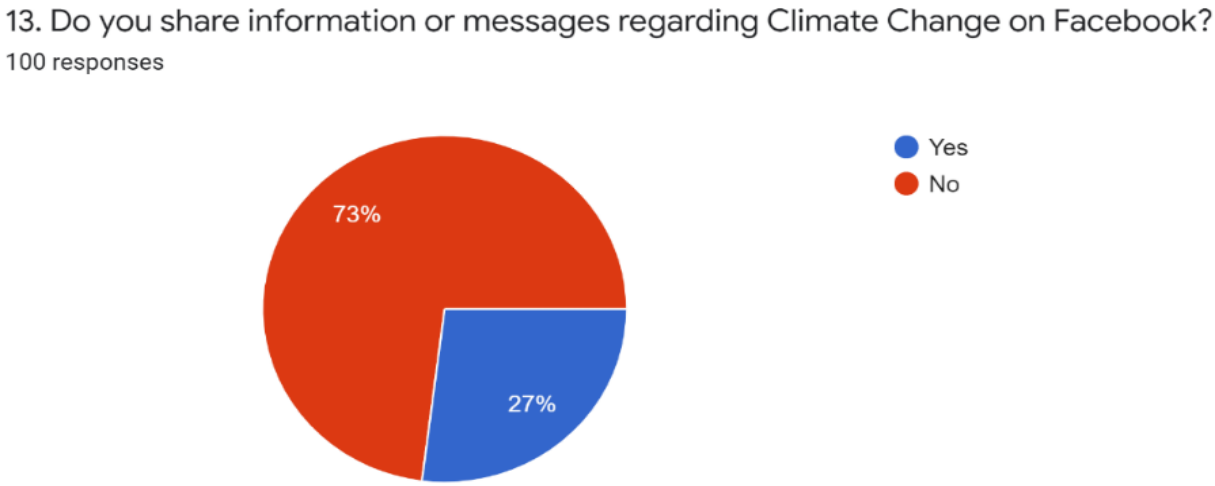

Diagram 16: Frequency distribution on sharing information on Climate Change on Facebook

The study observes that majority of 73% do not use Facebook to share information on climate change as compared to 27% respondents who do.

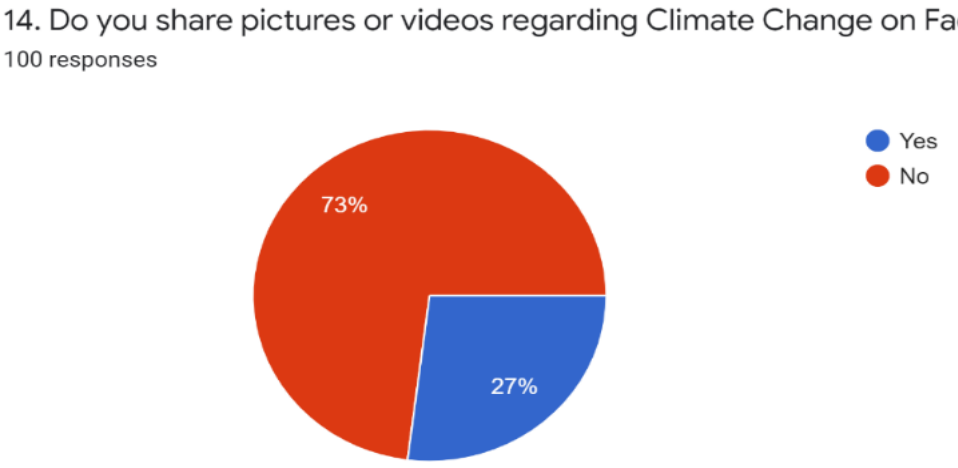

Diagram 17: Frequency distribution on sharing pictures & videos on Climate Change in Facebook

On the question of sharing pictures and videos on Facebook regarding issues of Climate Change, the study reveals that the majority 73% responded that they “do not” while 27% students admitted to it.

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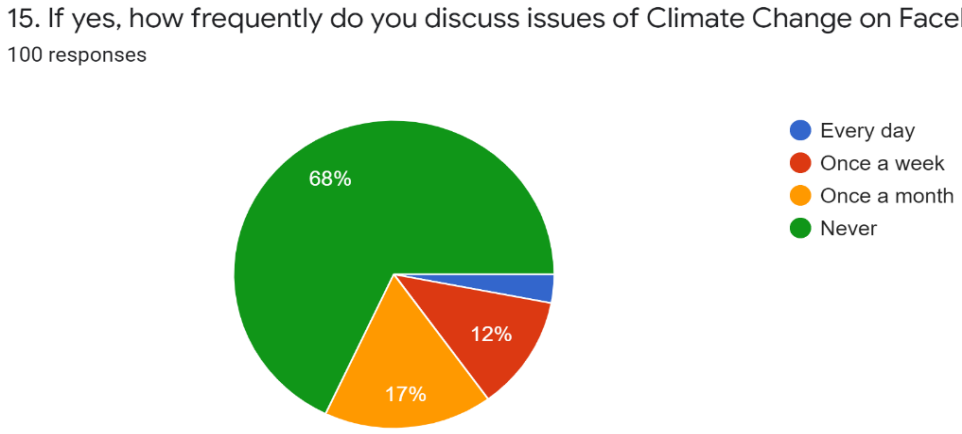

Diagram 18: Frequency distribution on discussion about Climate Change on Facebook

The study found that a majority of 68% students never use FB to discuss Climate Change while 17% students use it once a month, 12% use it once a week and 3% use FB daily to discuss Climate Change.

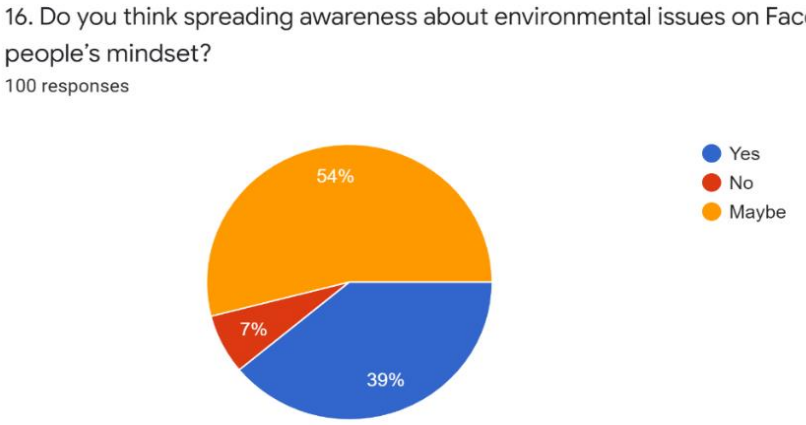

Diagram 19: Frequency distribution on whether spreading awareness about environmental issues on Facebook changes the mindset of people

The study found that 39% university students believe that spreading awareness about environmental issues on FB will bring change in people's mindset. However, the majority of 54% students are not sure whereas only 7% think that spreading awareness on FB will not help.

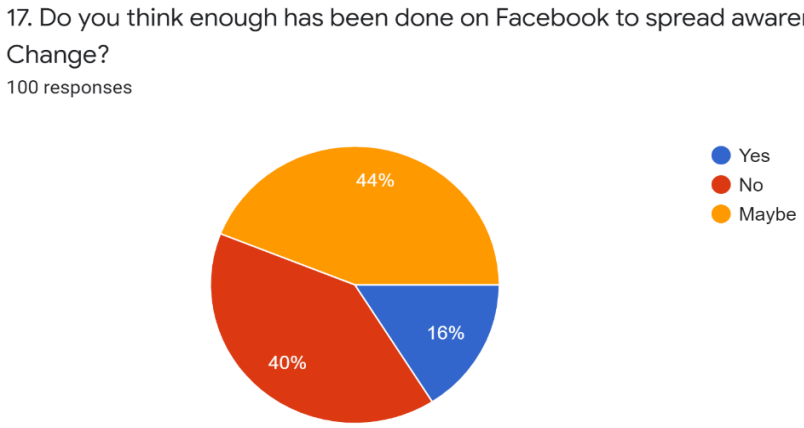

Diagram 20: Frequency distribution on adequacy of spreading awareness about Environmental Issues on Facebook to change the mindset of people

It was observed that 40% respondents think that not enough has been done on FB to spread awareness regarding Climate Change whereas 16% think that enough has been done and 44% are not sure.

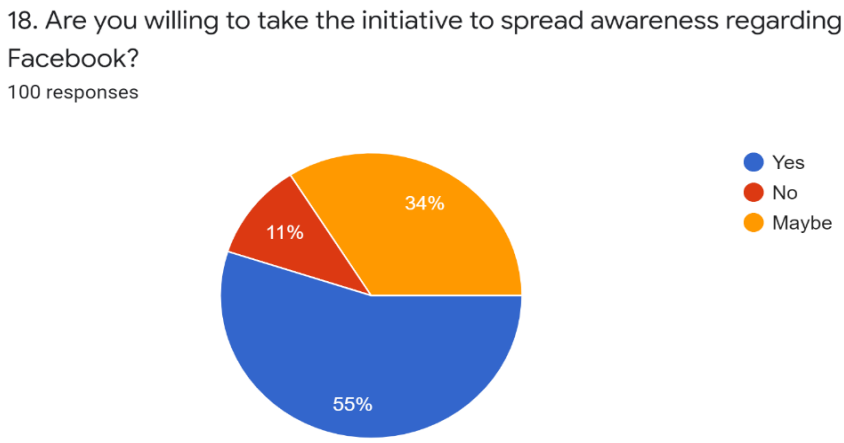

Diagram 21: Frequency distribution on willingness to initiate awareness on Climate Change on Facebook

It was observed that 55% of the respondents are willing to take the initiative regarding Climate Change on FB. 34% have not yet made up their mind and 11% are not willing.

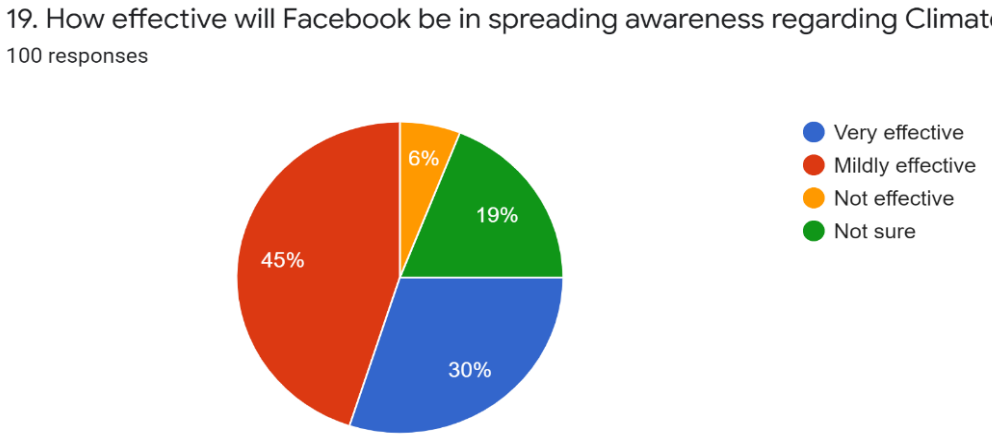

Diagram 22: Frequency distribution on Effectiveness of Facebook for Climate Change Campaign

The given analysis shows that majority of 45% think that it would be mildly effective followed by 30% who responded that FB will be very effective in spreading awareness regarding Climate Change. 19% are not sure while 6% think that FB will not be effective at all.

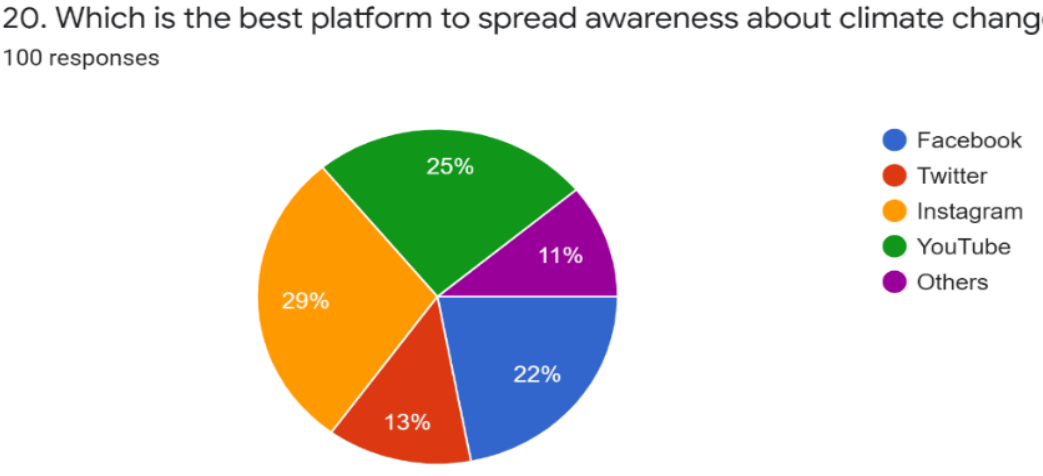

Diagram 23: Frequency distribution on the Best Platform to Spread Awareness on Climate Change

It is seen that out of 100 respondents, 29% say that it is Instagram followed by 25% for YouTube and 22% chose FB as the best platform to spread awareness about Climate Change. The remaining 13% think that it is Twitter and 11% think that other platforms are better.

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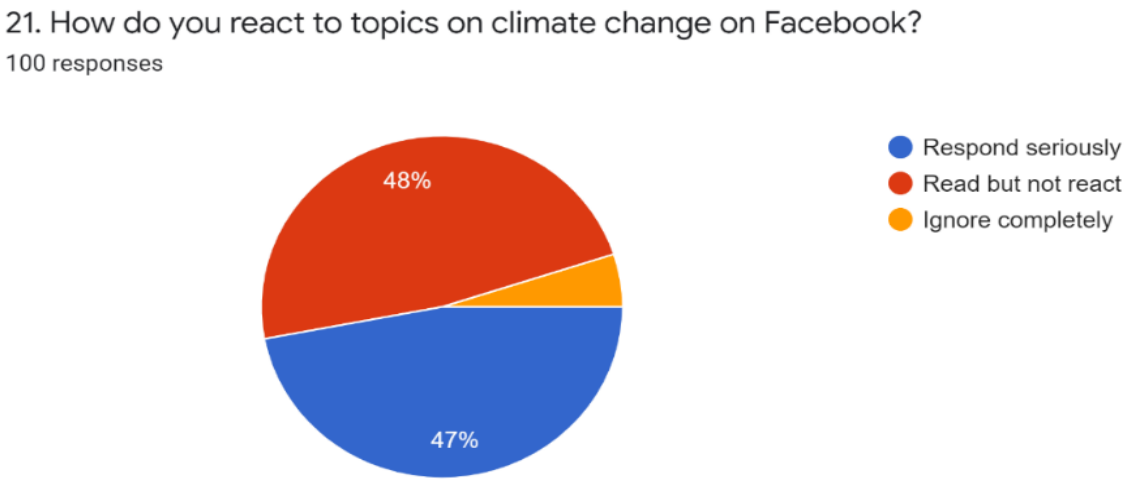

Diagram 24: Frequency distribution on reaction to topics on Climate Change on FB

The study found that 47% students respond seriously to topics of Climate Change on FB while an almost equal 48% "read but do not react" and 5% ignore completely.

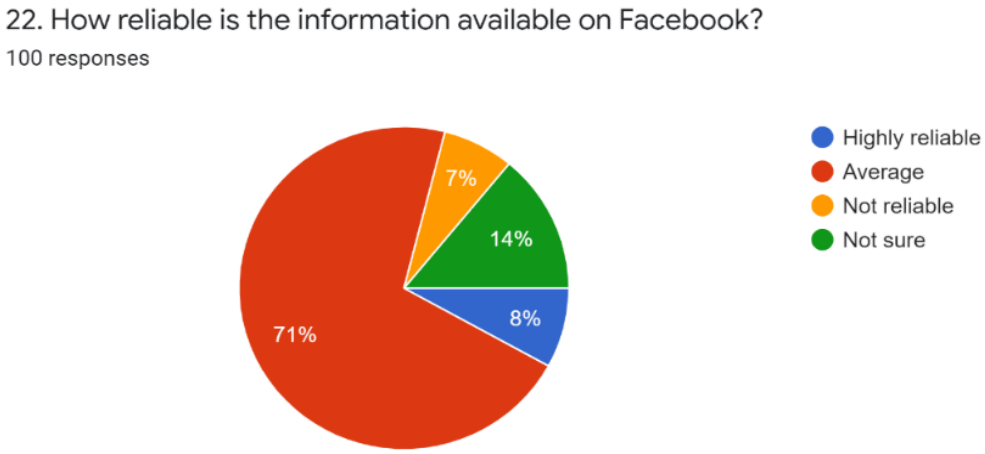

Diagram 25: Frequency distribution on reliability of information on Climate Change on FB

The study observes that a majority of 71% of the respondents rate the reliability of the information available on FB on Climate Change as average and 14% as not sure. Only 8% consider information on FB to be highly reliable, whereas 7% do not find information on FB to be reliable.

VII. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study, after analyzing the collected data of 100 university students pursuing in various disciplines of the four universities in Assam has drawn the following major findings on the study entitled, "Facebook as an Agent to Tackle Climate Change with reference to University Students in Assam."

After analysing the responses of the university students in Assam to assess their perspective and attitude

- → The study found that almost all of respondents (97%) are aware of the issues of Climate Change
- → Further it shows that majority (60%) university students obtain information related to Climate Change through digital media in comparison with electronic media (27%), newspapers (11%) and only 2% from books
- → While 80% are "very concerned" about Climate Change followed by 18% who were "indifferent" to it and 2% are "not at all concerned"
- → The study also observes that the majority of 85% university students are aware of the causes of Climate Change while 13% are not sure and 2% are not aware of the causes.

While assessing the kind of information or knowledge that students gain through digital media or Facebook regarding Climate Change

- ➢ It was found that majority of the students (80%) responded to the factor "burning fossil fuels" followed by 13% students to "deforestation" as the main cause of Climate Change, 2% chose transportation and 3% are not sure about the main cause.
- ➢ The study shows that 45% of the student community feels that the worst effect of Climate Change happening now is extreme temperatures, followed by 29% who say melting of glaciers and rising ocean levels and 13% find unseasonal rainfall to be the worst effect. 4% students think that the worst effect of climate change is extinction of species and drought respectively.

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- The study has observed that majority of the respondents (75%) think that saving energy at home and walking, cycling or taking public transport will be the most helpful factor in combating climate change while 16% students think "reducing, reusing, repairing and recycling" will be the most helpful along with 6% who are in favour of "switching to renewable sources of energy" and only 1% responded as not being sure about the messages.
- It maybe added that 91% students get information regarding climate change from the internet, 6% from television and 3% from books.

Studying the extent of effort that students make to spreading awareness and discussing issues related to climate change in Facebook

- The study found that the majority (68%) students do not use Facebook as a platform to discuss issues related to Climate Change
- Out of the 100 respondents 92% university students are not members of any NGO or group campaigning for the cause of Climate Change on Facebook whereas, only 2% students are members of some group or NGO campaigning for the cause.
- Majority (65%) of the students are not aware of any such group, page or NGO on Facebook that campaigns for issues related to Climate Change while 26% of the respondents are aware but 9 % are not sure.
- It is also observed that majority (73%) of the students responded to the factor "don't use Facebook for discussing Climate Change" while 27% admitted to sharing information about Climate Change on Facebook
- It was also found that majority of 73% don't share pictures and videos on Facebook on Climate Change whereas, 17% students use it once a month. 12 % students use it once in a week and 3% students use FB daily to discuss Climate Change
- The study found that a majority of 68% students never discuss Climate Change on FB. This percentage can certainly be increased by including FB activities in the curriculum of the students and make them realize the potential of FB towards more meaningful extracurricular activities in order to share vital information, bring about awareness and positive changes in society, especially on a critical issue like Climate Change.

Assessing the importance and influence of Facebook messages in bringing change in society for environmental issues

- From the view of the students, the study found the majority of them (54%) are not sure whether FB will bring change in people's mindset. While 39% think that spreading awareness about environmental issues on FB will bring changes in people's mindset and 7% responded that spreading awareness on FB will not help.
- It was observed that the majority of the respondents think that not enough has been done on FB to spread awareness regarding Climate Change.
- Significantly, it was observed that majority university students (55%) are willing to take the initiative regarding Climate Change on FB when compared to 34% students who have not yet made up their mind. The remaining 11% are not willing to take the initiative.
- It was observed that the response of 75% students was that FB will be an effective platform to spread awareness regarding Climate Change.
- Out of 100 respondents, 29% think that Instagram is the best platform to spread awareness about Climate Change, followed by 25% who say it is YouTube, 22% think it is FB, 13% say Twitter and 11% think that other platforms are better.
- It was found that a maximum of 48% read but not react to topics of Climate Change on FB followed closely by 47% who respond seriously about the topics of Climate Change on FB and 5% who ignore these completely.
- The study observed that a majority of 71% university students rated FB as average regarding reliability of the information available on it. 14% responded as not sure, 8% think it is reliable while 7% do not find it reliable.

From the above findings this study has come to the conclusion that Facebook can be employed as an effective social media platform to communicate important messages about the causes of climate change amongst the student communities in various universities in Assam. Facebook can also be an effective tool to share information and ideas to fight against the causes of climate change. A sizeable number of the respondents (university students) have supported this medium because of the extensive global outreach and popularity of Facebook. While FB is more commonly seen as a light-hearted social media platform, its effectiveness and influence across the people for spreading serious issues like Climate Change cannot be underestimated. In this digital age, Facebook has an enormous potential to act as an agent to tackle the causes of climate change and therefore, Facebook should be adopted as a module in university curriculums on various disciplines that deals the discourses on climate change, environmental science, disaster management etc. Facebook can indeed tap into various awareness campaigns on preservation and conservation of natural resources, flora and fauna, natural habitats in order to bring changes into the mindset and responses of people across the world for saving Planet Earth from the extinction in future. This will be the much-needed positive development in the lives of people in general and university students in particular to give environment a chance to remain strong and healthy. This study opens the door for future researchers to study the inclusion of social media as an integral part of university curriculum as well as research and development in order to help them recognize its importance as a powerful soft tool of communication in the cause of Climate Change.

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