



Impact of social media on youth's mental health in india: A Sociological Study

Dr. Seema Rani

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Government Degree College, Jahangirabad, Bulandshahr, UP,
India.

¹Corresponding Author Email: seema.kota23@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The last ten years of social media platform expansion in India has created a complete transformation social environment which young people now experience. With 2023 showing over 467 million active social media users India ranks among the biggest digital user base which grows rapidly throughout the world because its users include many young people who belong to the 15 to 30 age group. Social media platforms provide users with exceptional opportunities to connect and express themselves and gather information yet these platforms create multiple psychological dangers which mental health experts and sociologists increasingly study. The research studies how social media affects mental health among Indian youth through three sociological theories that include social comparison theory and symbolic interactionism and the sociology of digital culture. The research investigates various elements which include anxiety and depression and cyberbullying and identity formation and social validation and sleep disruption and algorithmic content curation. The research study analyzes social media usage among different genders and examines how rural areas and urban areas create a digital access gap and investigates how families and schools help students manage their online time. The study ends with recommendations which develop policies to improve digital health for Indian youth.

Keywords: Social Media, Mental Health, Cyberbullying, Screen Time, Digital Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

Social media has become the most important social force of the twenty-first century because it changed how people interact with each other and build their identities and handle information and their social interactions with others. The most radical social changes have occurred in India as a result of this transformation. The Digital India program has brought affordable internet access to more people while low-

cost smartphones became widely available and social media platforms like Facebook Instagram YouTube Snapchat Twitter X and ShareChat and Josh entered the market.

India currently possesses its most social media-active youth population which includes 600 million citizens who are under the age of 25. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) reported in 2023 that social media usage in India reached above 35 percent among youth aged 15 to 24. Indian youth spend three to five hours daily on social media platforms which represents a significant increase since the post-COVID period when people used online platforms for virtual communication during extended lockdowns and school shutdowns.

The advantages of social media platforms which include digital mental health resources and various support groups and artistic platforms and educational materials still do not outweigh the harmful mental health effects that come from users who spend too much time on these platforms without any restriction. The increasing incidence of depression and anxiety and body image issues and social isolation and sleep problems and cyberbullying among Indian youth has led researchers and policymakers and mental health experts to study how social media affects the mental health of this generation. The study investigates this relationship between digital platforms and Indian youth mental health through a sociological framework.

The Socio-Cultural Context of Social Media Use in India

The distinct social-cultural environment which creates this phenomenon must be understood to evaluate social media's effects on Indian youth. India showcases exceptional diversity through its various language and religious and caste and class and regional identity differences which determine how young people use digital platforms and those platforms impact their self-identity and mental health.

Social media has become a fundamental part of youth culture in metropolitan cities such as Mumbai and Delhi and Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The platform functions as a tool which people use to establish friendships and romantic relationships and compete academically and pursue their desired lifestyle. Urbanized youth are frequently navigating dual social worlds — one rooted in the physical spaces of family, neighborhood, and school, and the other in the vast, algorithmically curated universe of digital content. The social performances which people exhibit online conflict with their offline social interactions, which creates a psychological burden that sociologists have termed 'context collapse' because social boundaries disappear in digital environments.

The situation in semi-urban and rural regions of India shows different patterns which still create serious issues. The mobile internet network expansion through Jio has brought internet access to millions of first-time internet users who live in small towns and villages yet they now use social media without proper digital skills and online safety training. The users face high risks of encountering misleading information and abusive online behavior because they tend to compare their personal experiences with the polished success stories shared by urban influencers and celebrities.

The combination of caste and class establishes a more complex situation. Researchers from Equality Labs have documented that Dalit youth and economically disadvantaged individuals face caste-based harassment

on social media platforms through targeted attacks. Young people experience major psychological conflict because they try to show social advancement through lifestyle content which they cannot afford to actually live. The sociologist Shiv Visvanathan has argued that in India's hierarchical social order social media becomes a site of intense symbolic struggle where young people negotiate questions of belonging status and identity in an intensely public manner.

Theoretical Frameworks

The various sociological and psychological theories provide essential frameworks for researching how Indian youth use social media and their mental health status. The Social Comparison Theory which Leon Festinger developed in 1954 states that people determine their self-value and skills through self-comparison with other individuals. Social media platforms allow users to show their best selves through filtered pictures and selected life moments and brief video clips which create a false impression of their actual existence. The process of social comparison creates extreme mental health challenges for Indian youth who must deal with social demands that include academic achievement and marriage and career success and their social standing in society.

George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman developed symbolic interactionism as a framework for understanding social behavior. Goffman developed the theory of 'impression management' to describe how people in social situations create a perfect version of themselves for their audiences. Young Indians use Instagram and Snapchat to build their online identities through a careful process of choosing pictures and writing captions and hashtags that will help them create a specific social image. The way people present themselves to others plays a fundamental role in their development of identity and self-worth and their mental health status. Adolescents who depend on social media platforms for social approval through likes and comments and shares and followers face serious psychological issues when their performance does not meet their expectations.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens' concept of 'reflexive identity' is also pertinent here. According to Giddens, people in modern times must create and update their personal identities because they face multiple social options and lack established societal beliefs. Social media enables young people to build their identities through reflexive self-construction which forces them to match their identities with current cultural trends and political situations and social standards. Indian youth who live between their family's traditional values and their desire for modern global citizenship face psychological challenges throughout the process of building their digital identities.

Key Mental Health Impacts

Indian youth who use social media excessively experience various mental health effects which research studies have established. Social media usage creates an anxiety disorder which stands as the main mental health effect that researchers discovered. The Indian Psychiatry Society conducted a 2022 survey which found that 60 percent of youth aged 15 to 25 reported experiencing anxiety symptoms because they used social media, which included fear of missing out (commonly known as FOMO), online reputation concerns,

and negative online interaction distress. The constant digital presence of social media platforms which delivers notifications and messages and updates at any time creates a situation where people must remain online which leads to increased anxiety and chronic stress according to psychological experts.

Depression represents another major issue. Research studies demonstrate a consistent link between excessive social media use and depressive symptoms especially in adolescent girls. The process begins with people comparing their social status which creates feelings of inadequacy which leads to people avoiding real-world relationships while they use digital platforms as their primary coping strategy. The Indian Journal of Psychiatry published a 2021 study which showed that adolescents who used social media for over four hours daily reported higher depressive symptoms than those who used social media for less than two hours daily. Social media platforms create body image dissatisfaction as the strongest social media effect that specifically affects Indian youth. Instagram and YouTube in particular display beauty and fitness content which shows highly specific physical appearance standards that most people cannot reach and which Western culture has created. For young Indian women exposure to this content creates severe harm because they must already deal with complicated cultural pressures about skin color and body weight and femininity standards. Research studies show that Indian adolescent girls who use Instagram excessively develop body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors and low self-esteem. The Indian skin-lightening industry uses social media as its main advertising tool because social media enables filters and influencer culture to create beauty standards which result in actual psychological harm to people.

Social media platforms have a second mental health effect which arises from the existence of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying creates an unending form of harassment because it follows its targets from public areas into their private domestic environments. The pattern of cyberbullying in India shows how attackers use existing social divisions based on gender and caste and religion and sexuality to target their victims. Young women and LGBTQ+ youth experience a higher rate of victimization. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported a substantial increase in cybercrime incidents which specifically targeted minors according to their 2020 report. The ongoing effects of cyberbullying lead to various psychological disorders which include depression and social withdrawal and post-traumatic stress symptoms and suicidal thoughts in severe cases. Public interest in online harassment as a problem has increased after multiple Indian teenagers died by suicide because of extended online bullying.

Sleep disruption is a less discussed but critically important dimension of social media's impact on youth mental health. The blue light from screens disrupts melatonin production and circadian rhythms while social media content creates psychological stimulation that prevents young people from sleeping. Research shows that Indian youth who use social media during nighttime hours experience worse sleep quality and shorter sleep time while they also suffer from increased daytime fatigue. The disruption to sleep affects multiple aspects of psychological health because sleep serves as the basis for emotional control and mental functioning and psychological wellbeing.

Gendered Dimensions of Social Media Use

The mental health effects of social media platforms show different impacts on Indian youth based on their gender identity. Research findings demonstrate that social media use produces different psychological effects on young men and young women because of existing gender disparities in Indian society. The social media environment exposes Indian young women to excessive beauty standards and sexual harassment and gender-based cyberbullying. The excessive visibility of female bodies throughout digital culture together with Indian cultural traditions about female modesty and family honor and sexual purity creates a digital space which presents special challenges to young women. Many young women choose to self-censor their digital expressions because social media platforms allow people to misuse their personal photos and videos which they shared with a specific group.

Young men face distinct pressure that originates from their gender. The social media content which presents masculine stereotypes through its portrayal of muscular body types and wealth displays and sexual conquest stories and aggressive behavior shows how these elements create toxic masculinity which brings about actual psychological harm. Young men who do not perform idealized masculinities according to online standards will face shame and social isolation and depression. The unregulated digital content systems of YouTube and WhatsApp have turned into primary pathways through which young men become radicalized into extremist ideologies and hateful views about women which creates major problems for understanding how these platforms shape social behavior.

Algorithmic Culture and Psychological Manipulation

The way social media platforms design their algorithms affects user experiences which creates an important social media aspect that people tend to overlook as they evaluate mental health effects. Social media platforms use advanced algorithms which study user patterns to deliver content that maintains user engagement while people watch their screens for extended periods because platforms need to keep users interested. The psychological effects on young Indian users occur because they lack the ability to detect and fight against these designed systems which control their behavior.

The 'infinite scroll' feature and notification systems which use variable reward schedules and social validation systems which create dopaminergic feedback loops through likes and shares and comments all work together to give psychological control to users. Researchers who study behavior have discovered that these systems function similarly to casino slot machines which create uninterrupted player engagement at the expense of mental health. The result, for many young Indian users, is a pattern of compulsive use that mirrors the behavioral profile of addiction, characterized by loss of control, withdrawal symptoms, neglect of offline responsibilities, and continued use despite negative consequences.

Protective Factors and Resilience

The analysis above explains social media risks but sociologists have found protective factors which create positive outcomes on social media platforms. Social media functions as an essential source of peer assistance for young people who experience social exclusion in their physical social environments. The online spaces that LGBTQ+ youth in India use to connect with others about their experiences have become

life-saving safe spaces because they face high social discrimination which leads to their exclusion from family and educational and social environments. Young people who experience mental health issues have improved their well-being through social media because they use online communities and peer support networks and mental health resources.

Research shows that digital literacy and media education serve as the primary protective factors which stop social media to cause negative effects on mental health. Young people who have been educated to critically engage with digital content — to recognize algorithmic curation to understand the performative and constructed nature of online self-presentation and to maintain a healthy skepticism toward idealized digital narratives — show greater psychological resilience to the pressures of social media. Family communication and parental involvement also play a significant moderating role with research showing that young people who discuss their online experiences with supportive parents are better equipped to navigate digital challenges.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The mental health effects of social media use by Indian youth require multiple research centers which should coordinate their efforts to establish individual family institutional and governmental solutions. The Information Technology Act of India and the Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2022 serve as important policy foundations which need to develop into a complete digital welfare system that experts recommend. Sociologists and public health professionals have recommended stronger age verification requirements together with mandatory content moderation rules and the complete ban of certain deceptive design elements which target users under the age of eighteen.

Educational institutions need to establish digital literacy programs because their function in digital literacy education remains essential. Media literacy should become a national educational priority for schools and colleges as their curricula need to include digital citizenship and online mental health and data privacy and algorithmic bias. The National Education Policy 2020 indicates a need for digital literacy development but the actual implementation of this policy has not achieved proper execution in this particular area. Educational institutions must increase their mental health services while decreasing stigmas to provide young people with social media-related psychological support which includes immediate access to culturally appropriate resources.

The community and family awareness campaigns need to engage parents and educators and community leaders to discuss responsible social media use. The campaigns require development of solutions which match the unique social and cultural needs of different Indian family environments because universal solutions will not work in India. The users of technology systems need to understand that technology companies hold both ethical and legal duties to protect user mental health. The public health initiative requires design changes which include removing infinite scroll and restricting social validation metrics and establishing strong mental health support resources on platforms.

Conclusion

The usage of social media by Indian youth affects their mental health in ways that need detailed study from a sociological perspective. The research demonstrates that social media use results in mental health problems, which include anxiety and depression and body image issues and cyberbullying and sleep problems and compulsive usage, because digital platforms and Indian cultural practices and the specific characteristics of adolescent and young adult development create social structures that influence these psychological results.

A sociological approach requires us to investigate social media usage among young people through their individual behavior and the social cultural economic and technological systems which define their online behavior patterns. The situation requires us to address how digital harm affects different groups based on their gender and caste and socioeconomic status. The situation demands that organizations and government bodies establish solutions which match the urgency and scale of the existing problem. India stands at a critical juncture because its youth population uses digital technologies and the present decisions related to regulations and educational systems and platform development and mental health services will determine the psychological outcomes for an entire generation. The government should use sociological research results to support its decisions because the correct choices will create better results and research will show better solutions.

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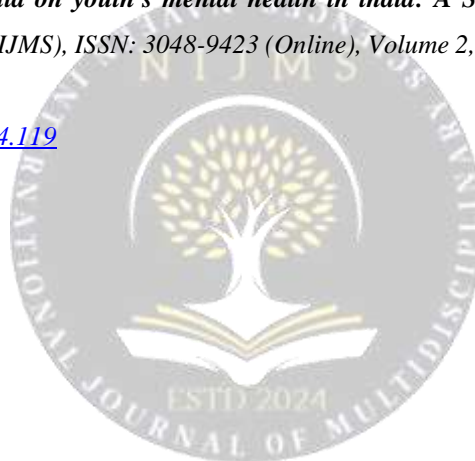
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