

SOCIAL MEDIA, YOUTH IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important institution of everyday life among young people in India. It shapes communication, friendship, cultural consumption, political participation, educational exchange, self-presentation and the construction of personal and collective identities. This paper examines the relationship between social media use, youth identity, social relationships and digital well-being in contemporary India. It uses a descriptive and analytical design based on secondary evidence from official surveys, international reports and peer-reviewed sociological research. The analysis is guided by symbolic interactionism, Goffman's theory of self-presentation, Castells' network society, Bourdieu's forms of capital and the theory of social comparison. Results are presented through statistical and analytical tables. Official evidence shows that internet use among persons aged 15-29 reached 92.7 percent in rural India and 95.7 percent in urban India in 2025. Industry estimates placed India at approximately 491 million social-media user identities at the beginning of 2025. These figures demonstrate the structural importance of social platforms, although they do not prove equal access, identical intensity of use or uniform outcomes. The study finds that social media can strengthen peer support, learning, civic awareness and identity exploration, but it can also intensify status comparison, surveillance, misinformation, cyberbullying, gendered control and dependence on platform approval. Outcomes vary according to class, caste, gender, location, language, family environment and digital literacy. The paper concludes that youth social-media use should not be treated as either wholly beneficial or wholly harmful. A sociological approach must examine the social context, type of engagement, platform design and unequal distribution of digital resources. It recommends digital-literacy education, age-appropriate platform design, stronger privacy protections, institutional counselling, parental dialogue and youth-centred research.

KEYWORDS: Social media, youth, identity, self-presentation, social relationships, digital well-being, social comparison, India.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of smartphones and low-cost mobile data has transformed the social environment of Indian youth. Communication that once depended mainly on face-to-face interaction, letters, fixed telephones and local institutions now takes place through messaging applications, video-sharing services, social-networking sites and online communities. Young people maintain friendships, follow public figures, search for educational material, participate in cultural trends and express opinions through digitally mediated networks.

The National Statistical Office reported that 92.7 percent of rural residents and 95.7 percent of urban residents aged 15-29 had used the internet during the three months preceding the 2025 telecom survey. Among mobile-phone owners in this age group, smartphones accounted for 95.5 percent in rural areas and 97.6 percent in urban areas. These data show that digital communication is no longer a marginal activity among Indian youth. It is becoming part of the normal structure of education, leisure, friendship and citizenship.

DataReportal estimated 491 million social-media user identities in India in January 2025. This estimate should not be interpreted as 491 million unique or equally active persons because one individual may maintain several accounts and platform advertising tools use their own measurement procedures. Nevertheless, the scale indicates that social-media platforms have become major social institutions.

Sociology is concerned not merely with how many people use a platform but with how platforms reorganise interaction, power, identity and inequality. Social-media participation occurs within existing relations of family authority, gender norms, class resources, caste identities, linguistic communities and educational differences. The same platform may provide one user with professional visibility while exposing another to harassment or exclusion.

The term youth is used in this paper primarily for persons aged 15-29, consistent with the age category used in important Indian statistical reports. Adolescence and early adulthood are periods in which identity, friendship, occupational ambition and social recognition become particularly important. Social media provides continuous opportunities to observe others, present oneself, receive feedback and enter communities beyond one's immediate locality.

The paper therefore analyses social media as a social environment rather than a neutral communication tool. It studies both opportunities and risks, while avoiding the assumption that screen time alone determines outcomes. The effects of social media depend upon what young people do online, whom they interact with, the resources available to them and how platforms organise visibility and reward.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Public discussion often presents social media through two opposing narratives. The optimistic narrative describes it as a democratic technology that gives young people access to information, creativity, entrepreneurship and political voice. The pessimistic narrative associates it with addiction, distraction, anxiety, misinformation and declining face-to-face relationships. Both perspectives identify real tendencies, but neither is adequate when treated as a universal explanation.

The central sociological problem is that the outcomes of social-media use are unequal and context-dependent. A young person using a platform to attend academic groups, promote a small business or maintain supportive relationships has a different experience from a user exposed to harassment, unrealistic beauty standards or compulsive status comparison. Platform design, family relations, gender norms and socioeconomic position influence these outcomes.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1. Social media influences several institutions simultaneously, including family, education, politics, employment and popular culture.
2. Youth identity is increasingly negotiated through digital profiles, photographs, comments, followers and visible networks.
3. National access statistics do not capture differences in autonomy, privacy, advanced skills or quality of participation.
4. Gender, class, caste, language and rural-urban location influence both access and online experience.
5. Policy requires balanced evidence that recognises benefits while addressing harmful platform practices.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

6. To examine social media as an institution of youth socialisation and identity formation.
7. To analyse the relationship between online self-presentation and social recognition.
8. To study the effects of social media on friendship, family relations and civic participation.
9. To identify inequalities in access, autonomy, safety and digital outcomes.
10. To present major findings through statistical and sociological tables.
11. To recommend measures for healthy, safe and inclusive digital participation.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

12. How does social media influence the construction and performance of youth identity?
13. What opportunities does it create for social connection, education and civic engagement?
14. How do social comparison, harassment and misinformation affect young users?
15. How are experiences differentiated by gender, class, caste, language and location?
16. Which institutional responses can promote digital well-being without denying youth agency?

6. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on social media has moved from questions of simple access toward the quality, meaning and consequences of participation. Boyd described networked publics as spaces created through networked technologies in which young people gather, communicate and negotiate visibility. Such spaces are persistent, searchable and potentially accessible to audiences beyond those originally intended by the user.

Goffman's analysis of self-presentation remains highly relevant. Individuals manage impressions by selecting information, controlling appearance and adapting conduct to an audience. Social media extends this process by allowing profiles and posts to remain visible across time. Users may edit photographs, curate achievements and remove material that conflicts with a preferred identity. Yet complete control is impossible because other users can comment, tag, record and redistribute content.

The literature also examines social comparison. Festinger proposed that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others. Social platforms provide a continuous stream of selected achievements, attractive images and public indicators of popularity. Upward comparison may inspire some users but may cause inadequacy or dissatisfaction among others. The effect depends on vulnerability, interpretation and the type of content encountered.

Studies of youth digital life emphasise that benefits and harms coexist. Online interaction can maintain friendships, provide emotional support, connect marginalised individuals and create access to health or educational information. At the same time, cyberbullying, hate speech, image-based abuse, commercial surveillance and misinformation can produce serious risks. The 2023 advisory of the United States Surgeon General concluded that available evidence does not permit social media to be considered sufficiently safe for children and adolescents, while also recognising that it may provide community and support.

Indian research highlights the importance of family regulation, gender and cultural context. Ethnographic work in rural India shows that smartphone ownership and autonomy are gendered. Young women may face greater monitoring and restrictions because digital communication is connected with concerns about sexuality, family honour and marriage. Therefore, access cannot be measured only through household possession.

Recent Indian evidence also shows very high smartphone availability among adolescents. However, recreational social-media use may exceed educational use. This does not establish that recreation is inherently harmful; leisure and peer communication are legitimate social activities. The key issue is whether use becomes coercive, displaces necessary activities or exposes users to preventable harm.

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

7.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism views identity as an outcome of social interaction. Young people learn how others see them and adjust their conduct accordingly. Likes, comments, shares and follower counts become symbols through which approval and status are interpreted. Online identity is therefore produced relationally rather than privately.

7.2 Goffman's Presentation of Self

Goffman's distinction between front-stage and back-stage behaviour explains the curated character of profiles. The public profile operates as a front stage on which users display selected identities. Private messages and restricted groups may function as back-stage spaces, although screenshots and data retention make the boundary unstable.

7.3 Castells' Network Society

Castells argues that contemporary power increasingly operates through networks. Social media allows young people to enter networks of education, activism, entertainment and employment. However, platforms also concentrate power in corporations that control algorithms, advertising and visibility.

7.4 Bourdieu's Forms of Capital

Economic capital influences access to devices and connectivity. Cultural capital influences language, confidence and the ability to produce valued content. Social capital consists of useful online relationships, while symbolic capital appears as recognition, credentials and reputation. Digital participation can convert one form of capital into another, but advantaged groups are often better positioned to achieve this conversion.

7.5 Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory explains why idealised images and visible popularity metrics may influence self-evaluation. Platforms intensify comparison by making social information continuous and quantifiable. Comparison may motivate learning, but repeated exposure to highly edited success can create distorted standards.

7.6 Intersectionality

Intersectionality shows that youth are not a single homogeneous category. Gender, caste, class, disability, language, religion and location combine to shape access and vulnerability. A rural woman using a shared phone experiences digital life differently from an urban man with personal devices, private space and professional networks.

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives used in the study

Perspective	Central concept	Application to social media
Symbolic interactionism	Identity through interaction	Feedback shapes self-understanding
Goffman	Impression management	Profiles operate as curated performances
Castells	Network society	Power and opportunity flow through networks
Bourdieu	Economic, cultural and social capital	Resources influence digital benefits
Social comparison	Evaluation through others	Visible success affects self-assessment
Intersectionality	Combined inequalities	Experiences vary across social positions

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

8.1 Research Design

The paper follows a descriptive, analytical and review-based design. It synthesises secondary statistical evidence and sociological literature. It does not claim to present an original survey of respondents.

8.2 Sources of Data

17. The Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, 2025, published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
18. Digital 2025: India, prepared by DataReportal from platform and industry sources.
19. Reports of UNICEF, the World Health Organization and public-health authorities.
20. Peer-reviewed sociological, communication and youth studies.
21. Classical and contemporary works on identity, networks, capital and social comparison.

8.3 Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included when they directly addressed youth internet use, social media, identity, relationships, well-being, inequality or digital safety. Priority was given to official statistics and research with clearly stated methods. International findings were used for theoretical comparison rather than automatically generalised to India.

8.4 Method of Analysis

Evidence was coded under six themes: access and intensity; identity and self-presentation; social relationships; learning and civic participation; risks and well-being; and social inequality. Percentage-point differences were calculated only when comparable official figures were available. Other results are presented as structured qualitative synthesis.

8.5 Ethical Considerations

The study uses publicly available aggregate information and does not contain identifiable personal data. No primary responses, percentages or causal claims have been invented. Mental-health associations are discussed cautiously because correlation does not necessarily demonstrate causation.

8.6 Limitations

22. Social-media user identities are not equivalent to unique persons.
23. Internet use during the preceding three months does not measure daily intensity or platform type.
24. National averages conceal state, district and community differences.
25. Self-reported ability may differ from tested digital skill.
26. Secondary analysis cannot establish individual-level causal relationships.
27. Platform features and user practices change rapidly.

Table 2. Analytical structure of the study

Dimension	Key indicators	Interpretive question
Access	Internet use, smartphone availability	Who can participate?
Autonomy	Ownership, privacy, family control	Who controls participation?
Identity	Profiles, images, feedback	How is the self presented?
Relationships	Peer support, conflict, family ties	How are interactions reorganised?
Well-being	Comparison, bullying, compulsive use	What risks and protections exist?
Outcomes	Learning, civic voice, opportunity	Who converts use into benefit?

9. RESULTS

9.1 Youth Internet Access

Official statistics show that internet use among Indian youth is widespread. The rural-urban difference among persons aged 15-29 was only three percentage points in 2025. This indicates substantial geographical diffusion of mobile connectivity, although it does not establish equality in connection quality, device ownership or advanced skills.

Table 3. Internet use among persons aged 15-29 in India, 2025

Area	Used internet in preceding three months (%)	Difference
Rural	92.7	-3.0 percentage points
Urban	95.7	Reference category

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, 2025.

9.2 Smartphone Availability Among Young Mobile Owners

Table 4. Smartphone ownership among mobile-phone owners aged 15-29

Area	Smartphone share among mobile owners (%)	Rural-urban gap
Rural	95.5	-2.1 percentage points
Urban	97.6	Reference category

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2025.

9.3 Scale of Social-Media Participation

Table 5. Selected indicators of India's digital and social-media environment

Indicator	Estimate	Interpretation
Internet users at start of 2025	About 806 million	Broad national digital participation
Social-media user identities	About 491 million	Large platform-mediated public sphere
Population share represented by social identities	33.7%	Not equal to unique active users
Primary youth access pattern	Smartphone-centred	Portable but often mobile-only participation

Source: DataReportal, Digital 2025: India. Estimates should be interpreted according to the source methodology.

These results establish the structural importance of digital platforms in youth life. They do not show that every young person uses social media, nor do they measure the quality of participation. The sociological significance lies in the normalisation of digitally mediated interaction across rural and urban settings.

9.4 Identity Formation and Self-Presentation

Table 6. Major identity functions of social media

Function	Positive possibility	Potential difficulty
Self-expression	Creative display of interests and values	Pressure to maintain an idealised image
Identity exploration	Experimentation with roles and communities	Conflict between online and offline expectations
Recognition	Feedback and visibility	Dependence on likes and follower counts
Community belonging	Connection with similar peers	Echo chambers and exclusion of outsiders
Professional identity	Portfolios and networking	Unequal advantage based on cultural capital
Collective identity	Caste, regional, linguistic or political solidarity	Polarisation and hostile boundary-making

The synthesis indicates that social media provides young people with expanded symbolic resources for identity construction. Users can combine local culture with global styles, communicate in multiple languages and participate in communities not available in their immediate surroundings. This is particularly important for individuals whose interests or identities are not recognised locally.

At the same time, online identity is shaped by platform metrics. Visible indicators such as views, likes and followers transform social approval into numbers. Young users may begin to evaluate personal worth through these metrics. The result is not uniform: some treat them casually, while others experience intense pressure to remain visible.

9.5 Social Relationships

Table 7. Effects on youth social relationships

Relationship domain	Strengthening mechanism	Risk mechanism
Friendship	Continuous contact and shared media	Misunderstanding, exclusion and public conflict
Family	Coordination across distance	Monitoring and intergenerational disagreement
Peer support	Advice and emotional solidarity	Unqualified advice and group pressure
Romantic relationships	Communication and partner discovery	Surveillance, coercion and image-based abuse
Educational networks	Teacher and peer resource-sharing	Distraction and unequal access
Community relations	Local mobilisation and information	Rumours and rapid spread of hostility

Social media does not simply replace face-to-face relationships. It creates hybrid relationships in which online and offline interaction overlap. A school friendship continues through messaging after class; a family relationship extends across migration; and local conflicts may be carried into public digital spaces.

The quality of relationships depends on trust, privacy and norms of communication. Persistent records and screenshots can make temporary conflict permanent. Conversely, online contact can preserve supportive relationships during geographical separation or social isolation.

9.6 Education, Civic Participation and Opportunity

Table 8. Constructive uses of social media among youth

Area	Examples	Possible outcome
Education	Tutorials, study groups, academic announcements	Expanded informal learning
Employment	Vacancies, portfolios, professional networking	Access to opportunity
Entrepreneurship	Promotion of products and services	Low-cost market visibility
Civic engagement	Campaigns, petitions and issue awareness	Youth political voice
Culture	Music, language and local heritage content	Cultural preservation and exchange
Mutual aid	Emergency information and fundraising	Rapid collective support

The results show that youth social-media use cannot be reduced to entertainment. Platforms operate as informal educational institutions, labour-market intermediaries and civic spaces. Young people may acquire skills, follow experts, locate scholarships and build professional reputations. These benefits, however, require digital literacy and the ability to judge source quality.

9.7 Risks and Digital Well-Being

Table 9. Major risks identified in the literature

Risk	Social process	Possible consequence
Social comparison	Exposure to selected success and appearance	Inadequacy or dissatisfaction
Cyberbullying	Public or repeated digital aggression	Fear, withdrawal or distress
Misinformation	Rapid circulation without verification	Poor decisions and polarisation
Commercial surveillance	Collection of behavioural data	Loss of privacy and manipulation
Compulsive engagement	Notifications and variable rewards	Displacement of sleep or study
Gendered abuse	Harassment and non-consensual sharing	Restricted participation and harm
Deepfakes and impersonation	Synthetic or altered content	Reputational damage and distrust

The literature does not support a simple claim that all social-media use causes poor well-being. Harm is more likely when use is compulsive, comparison-oriented, conflictual or connected with harassment. Active communication with supportive peers may have different effects from passive consumption of idealised content.

Platform architecture is sociologically important. Infinite scrolling, personalised recommendation and public popularity metrics are not neutral. They organise attention and influence what becomes visible. Digital well-being therefore cannot be treated solely as an issue of individual self-control; it also requires institutional and design responsibility.

9.8 Social Inequality in Youth Digital Experience

Table 10. Social differentiation of social-media participation

Dimension	Form of inequality	Likely effect
Class	Device quality, data affordability and private space	Unequal creation and professional use
Gender	Ownership, family monitoring and harassment	Reduced autonomy for many young women
Caste/community	Network segregation and discriminatory speech	Unequal recognition and exposure to hostility
Location	Connectivity and institutional opportunity	Rural-urban difference in quality of outcomes
Language	Dominance of English and major languages	Restricted access to specialised knowledge
Disability	Inaccessible interfaces and media	Exclusion from communication and learning
Education	Differences in verification and production skills	Unequal ability to convert information into benefit

The digital environment reproduces social inequality because users enter it with unequal resources. A middle-class student with a laptop, private room, English proficiency and professional guidance can use social media to accumulate cultural and social capital. A low-income user dependent on a shared phone may participate mainly through short periods of mobile access.

Gender inequality is particularly important. Young women may face restrictions on ownership, communication and public visibility. Harassment can function as a mechanism of exclusion by increasing the social cost of participation. Family monitoring may be justified in the language of safety but can also limit autonomy.

10. DISCUSSION

The findings support the proposition that social media is a contradictory institution. It expands communication and opportunity while creating new forms of surveillance, comparison and inequality. Symbolic interactionism explains how feedback becomes part of identity. Goffman's theory shows why users curate performances for imagined audiences. Castells explains the importance of connection to influential networks, while Bourdieu demonstrates why digital benefits are unevenly distributed.

The narrowing rural-urban gap in basic youth internet use is a major social change. Yet basic connection should not be confused with equal capability. The distinction between access, autonomy and outcomes remains essential. Young people who use shared phones, limited data or local-language entertainment may be connected but still excluded from advanced educational and professional activities.

The results also demonstrate why moral panic is inadequate. Restriction alone may deny young people educational resources, social support and political voice. Conversely, unrestricted commercial platform power

cannot be justified as youth freedom. A balanced approach must protect agency while regulating preventable harms.

11. MAJOR FINDINGS

Table 11. Consolidated findings

Area	Finding	Sociological implication
Access	Internet use is nearly universal among connected youth categories	Digital interaction is becoming normalised
Identity	Profiles enable exploration and impression management	Identity becomes visible, persistent and measurable
Relationships	Platforms strengthen contact but intensify conflict visibility	Online and offline ties are hybrid
Opportunity	Education, work and civic uses are substantial	Social media can build capital
Well-being	Effects vary by content, intensity and vulnerability	Screen time alone is insufficient explanation
Inequality	Resources and social position shape outcomes	Digital benefits are stratified
Governance	Platform design influences behaviour	Responsibility extends beyond individuals

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

28. Introduce digital and media literacy across secondary and higher education, including source verification, privacy, algorithm awareness and responsible AI use.
29. Require age-appropriate platform design, clear reporting mechanisms and rapid response to harassment and non-consensual content.
30. Promote dialogue-based family guidance rather than surveillance-only approaches that undermine trust and autonomy.
31. Expand counselling and peer-support services in schools and colleges without treating ordinary youth digital culture as pathology.
32. Support regional-language educational and safety content so that digital literacy is not restricted to English-proficient users.
33. Improve personal device access for disadvantaged students, especially rural women and low-income learners.
34. Regulate commercial data collection and provide understandable privacy settings.
35. Encourage platforms to reduce manipulative design and provide meaningful controls over recommendations, notifications and public metrics.
36. Conduct regular nationally representative studies that distinguish active communication, passive browsing, educational use and harmful exposure.

37. Include young people in the design of digital-safety policies because they possess direct knowledge of emerging practices.

13. CONCLUSION

Social media has become a central setting in which Indian youth communicate, learn, perform identity and seek recognition. High levels of internet and smartphone use demonstrate that digital life is integrated into contemporary socialisation. The evidence does not justify describing social media as either universally empowering or inherently destructive.

Its consequences depend on social context, platform design, type of engagement and the resources available to users. Digital participation can create social and cultural capital, but it can also reproduce class privilege, gender control and linguistic inequality. Effective policy must therefore combine youth agency, family dialogue, institutional support, equitable access and platform accountability.

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