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Digital Divides And Well-Being: Navigating Social Media Landscapes Across Socioeconomic Strata In Telangana During The COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Social Networking site usage in recent years has been made easy with the boom of new gadgets such as smartphones and digital cameras facilitated by internet penetration. Today, it goes without saying that Social Media Usage has become an essential part of everybody's lives. From an era where Social Media sites only facilitated a mere need for technological proximity and extended the means of communication to now impacting people's lives, it has evolved much. This paper examines the linkage between the usage of social networking sites and their impact on the psychological well-being of individuals. The total number of respondents for the survey was 630 students, of whom 53.7% were male and 46.3% were female. Data was collected through Google Forms, and the chi-square test and ANOVA were used to analyze and interpret the data. Data reveals a significant impact of SNS on the psychological well-being of the Middle-income groups compared with the lower and high-income groups.

Keywords: social networking usage; psychological wellbeing; income levels; low; medium; high

Introduction

The medium, or process, of our time is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted (McLuhan & Fiore, 2001). Everything is changing family, neighborhood, education, job, government, and relationship to "others." Moreover, they are changing dramatically. Throughout history, the character of societies has been influenced to a greater extent by the medium through which people communicate rather than the actual content of the communication (Marshall McLuhan, 1967). For people staying far away, digitization eases communication

Digitization began with the advent of computers in the 1950s. Since then, the non-stop march of digitization has transformed nearly everything into computer-friendly 1s and 0s and has changed how we work, communicate, shop, bank, and even relax and entertain ourselves (Tarpey, 2020). The internet, originating as an academic research initiative in 1969 and evolving into the world's foremost global network during the 1990s, has facilitated communication extensively. Presently, it is utilized by over 2 billion individuals globally.

With new technology came digital cameras and smartphones. Alongside, the first recognizable social network site, SixDegrees.com, was launched in 1997 and allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends, and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. Later came what are most popular now: LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Vine, Zing, Reddit, etc.

Social media is a field spread widely across the Internet, encompassing vast legions worldwide, pouring our heads and hearts out to anyone who would care to listen. There have been innumerable arguments about it: its impact on our society, how it has been setting mental constructs, and how it has contributed to our growing dependence on technology and a need for the approval of what we think and do. Numerous research and statistics have pointed to social media having an unthinkable impact on everything, be it positive or negative. (The Origin and History of Social Media, n.d.)

In 2016, Regional Mobile Operator Reliance Jio launched extremely cheap data tariffs. Indians went from consuming an average of 700MB of data per month to 11GB; with Jio's radical move of making 4G available for free, Jio has changed the consumption habits of hundreds of millions of consumers (Ghosh, 2019).

Consequently, Social Media/ Social Networking sites have become an integral part of our daily lives. Humans have an innate desire to socialize, and social networking sites facilitate the same. Social media is essential to communicating with people, sharing/asking for information, following/evaluating/interpreting events, etc., for everyone (Gok, 2016). People benefit from interpersonal, group, entertainment, and organizational communication. With recent plans of up to 3GB daily, people spend hours each day surfing, browsing, and scrolling on Social Networking Sites.

The introduction of the government's Digital India initiative, hand in hand with the increasing internet penetration over the recent years, resulted in the country's digital population amounting to approximately 624 million active users as of February 2021. The traffic in the world's second-largest internet market at this stage was largely dominated by mobile internet users (Keelery, Internet usage index across India in 2021, by category, 2021).

In 2021, India ranked 108 out of 120 countries for internet usage. According to research, Internet usage involves measuring the size of the connected population in terms of Internet and mobile connectivity (Keelery, Internet usage index across India in 2021, by category, 2021).

Interestingly, India has the highest number of disconnected people despite having the second-largest online market in the world. That being said, 50% of the country's population still does not have internet access (ang, 2020). The absence of internet access or devices for engaging with social networking sites can be attributed to various factors such as financial constraints, limited access to electricity, signal problems, low income, and so on.

In the contemporary era, most individuals use their smartphones or tablets to engage with social media. While this offers convenience in staying connected, it also implies constant accessibility to social media. This continual, hyper-connected state may lead to issues with impulse control, as the continuous alerts and notifications can disrupt concentration, affect focus, disturb sleep, and result in a dependency on the smartphone (Kleyman, 2023).

Social media platforms are crafted to capture your focus, encourage prolonged online presence, and prompt frequent checks for updates on your screen. It serves as a revenue source for companies. However, akin to the compulsions found in gambling or addictions to substances like nicotine, alcohol, or drugs, frequent use of social media can lead to psychological cravings. When you receive positive interactions, such as likes, shares, or favourable reactions to a post, it can activate the release of dopamine in the brain—the same "reward" neurotransmitter associated with winning on a slot machine, indulging in chocolate, or smoking a cigarette, for instance. The more you are rewarded, the more inclined you become to spend additional time on social media, even if it begins to have adverse effects on other aspects of your life (Lawrence et al., 2021).

Adding to that, Given its relatively recent emergence, limited research is available to definitively establish the long-term impacts of social media usage, whether positive or negative. Nevertheless, numerous studies indicate a robust association between extensive social media use and an elevated risk of depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. A study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania in 2018 revealed that reducing social media consumption to 30 minutes per day led to a notable decrease in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbances, and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). However, it is not necessary to make such drastic cutbacks in social media usage to enhance mental well-being. The same study concluded that simply being more mindful of your social media use can positively affect your mood and concentration (Riley, 2022). Studies in Telangana youth's usage of social networking sites and well-being demonstrated a significant impact of SNS usage on well-being among urban and rural youth (Putta, Kohir , & Chavan, 2022). While 30 minutes a day may not be a realistic target for many of us, we can still benefit from reducing our time on social media (Lawrence et al., 2021).

Few studies examined the impact of smartphone usage and Social networking sites during the Covid-19 in India. The COVID-19 crisis has led to the excessive usage of Smartphones to communicate and connect, which leads to Problematic smartphone usage (Putta & Shaik, Problematic Smartphone use and Emerging Indian Adulthood during Covid-19: A Structural Equation Model, 2023). Further studies have investigated the usage of specific social networking sites such as Instagram during the Covid-19 among Indian Female Adults which had a

significant impact on their well-being (Putta, PASSIVE INSTAGRAM USE AND EMERGING INDIAN FEMALE ADULT WELL-BEING: AMEDIATION ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON AND FOMO DURING COVID-19, 2022).

Furthermore, we must understand people's different economic statuses. Even though internet accessibility is at an economical price, some people live below the poverty line. While there are a lot of demographic factors to be taken into consideration, there is still a gap in researching if income level is a factor that determines if there is a positive or negative impact on psychological well-being caused by social media.

Aim

Although the relationship between social networking sites and psychological well-being has been established, more is needed to know how income levels affect this relationship. The present study explored the relationship between whether income levels impact the Usage of Social Networking sites and the psychological well-being of the youth of Telangana State.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of the digital divide that speculates a socioeconomic gap between residents of a nation and their access to information, technology, and communication supports the research. However, elevating the economic gap in incomes is the main reason that furthers the digital divide. The three main determinants of the digital divide are information accessibility, information utilization and information.

Alongside the Digital Divide Theory, the Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals engage in self-evaluation by comparing themselves to others, whether those are friends, influencers, or individuals encountered randomly. Psychologist Leon Festinger proposed the Social Comparison Theory in 1954, suggesting that people instinctively compare themselves to others to satisfy the fundamental human desire for self-assessment. Central to his theory is the concept that individuals gain insights into their abilities, achievements, and personality by evaluating themselves compared to others. (Stephen Garcia, 2022). Festinger also implies that opinions, values,

abilities and performances are compared when our self-evaluation is not clear, which in the case of our research is found to be true for some instances.

Hypotheses:

Drawing from the outlined theory and literature, the following hypotheses are articulated. The anticipated pattern is that the correlation between the utilization of Social Networking Sites and psychological well-being fluctuates across distinct income levels.

- (i) Below 60K,
- (ii) Between 60K to 2Lakhs
- (iii) Between 2Lakhs to 5 Lakhs
- (iv) Between 5Lakhs to 10Lakhs
- (v) Above 10 Lakhs

The World Bank categorizes nations into low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high-income groups, relying on the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. These classifications are adjusted annually, considering economic growth, inflation, exchange rates, and population growth. As of the fiscal year 2021, the economies are categorized as follows:

1. Low – Below 1045\$ (79000 in INR)
2. Lower – Middle (between 1046\$-4095\$, 79000-310000 in INR)
3. Upper – Middle (between 4096\$-12695\$, 310000-960000 in INR)
4. High (above 12695\$, more than 960000 in INR)

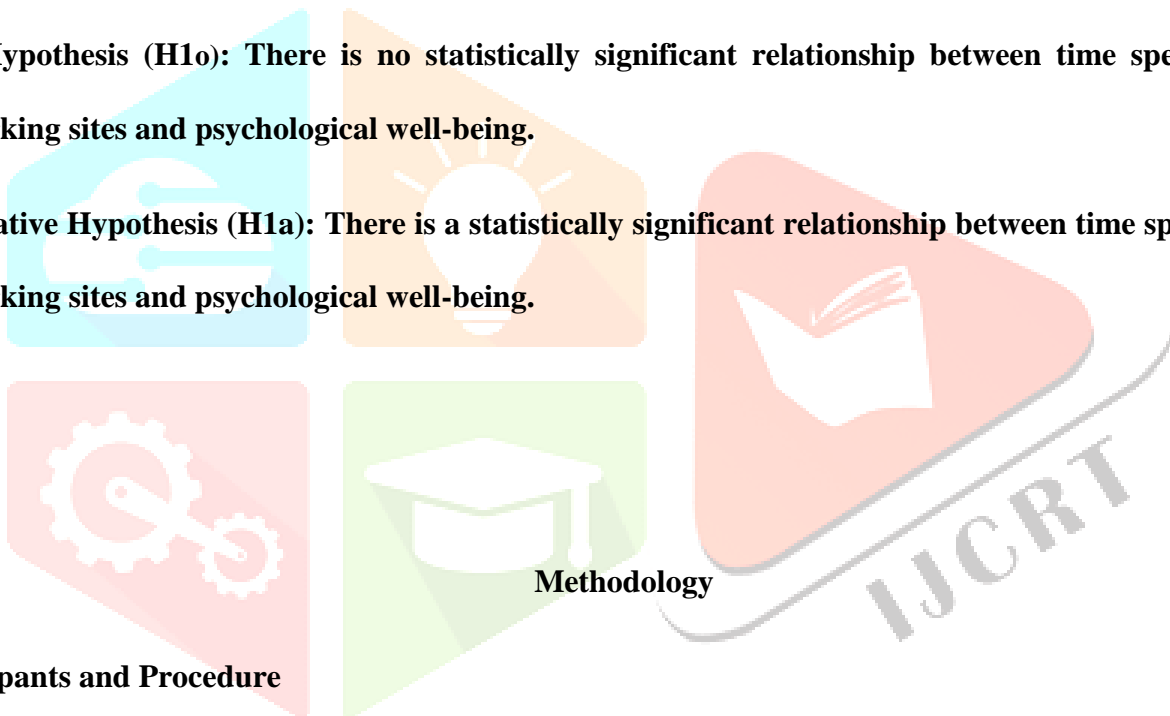
Based on the above classification, we classified below 60K as Low Income, Between 60K to 2 Lakhs and Between 2 Lakhs to 5 Lakhs as Medium Income and Between 5Lakhs to 10Lakhs and Above 10 Lakhs as High-Income groups.

Null Hypothesis (H1o): There is no statistically significant relationship between the income levels of respondents and usage of social networking sites.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1a): There is a statistically significant relationship between the income levels of respondents and the usage of social networking sites.

Null Hypothesis (H1o): There is no statistically significant relationship between time spent on social networking sites and psychological well-being.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1a): There is a statistically significant relationship between time spent on social networking sites and psychological well-being.



Participants and Procedure

The participants were Telangana Youth aged between 18 and 24 years. A non-random sample of 670 participants participated in the survey. The researchers dropped 30 entries for incomplete and duplicate responses, and 10 responses were dropped for careless/inattentive responses. In the end, the sample consists of 630 participants. Data was gathered through online surveys; the questionnaire was distributed through Google forms, and the data was also collected offline.

Measures

In addition to the demographics assessed, we administered the following survey items.

Social Networking Usage

Social networking usage is measured by asking the respondents the amount of time they spend on social networking sites. They were given the options of less than 1 hour, more than 1 hour, more than 5 hours and less than 1 hour in a week.

Ryffs Psychological Well-Being (18-item Scale)

The Ryffs Psychological Well-being scale is widely used in measuring the mental health of both the clinical and general populations with the purpose of testing, prevention and health promotion, and it has been adopted to suit other populations with Cultural backgrounds. Positive psychological well-being is considered a critical indicator of good mental health.

In order to assess the mental health of the sample for the final study, carol Ryff's psychological well-being scale was a part of the questionnaire.

Developed by psychologist Carol D. Ryff, the PWB scales are in 84(long form), 54&42(medium form) and 18-item versions, even though 42 item PWB scale is considered more statistically sound than the 18-item (short form) scale (Ryff et al., 2007) it takes longer to administer. It makes it unsuitable to include in a survey questionnaire to add to an already lengthy questionnaire, which significantly impacts the response rate of the sample. A shortened version of the 42-item Scale (18 items) is used in the survey. The 18 scales consisted of eighteen statements on a seven-point scale where the respondents rate how strongly they agree or disagree based on the multidimensional model of Carol Ryff, which included questions related to the dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relation with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. The responses are later reverse-coded so that higher scores indicate greater well-being, and then separate subscale scores are calculated by summing all items within each subscale.

Response format

1 = strongly agree; 2 = somewhat agree; 3 = a little agree; 4 = neither agree nor disagree; 5 = a little disagree; 6 = somewhat disagree; 7 = strongly disagree.

Duration

3-5 minutes

Reading Level

6th to 8th grade

Data Analysis

The data collected were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS. The initial data were collected by classifying family income into five categories: below 60000, between 60000-2 lakhs, between 2L-5L, between 5L-10L and above 10L. To better understand the hypothesis tested, between 60000 – 2L and between 2L-5L were taken as middle, and those between 5L – 10L and above 10L were considered high and below 60K as low-income groups. Social networking usage is analyzed in terms of how much time they spend on social networking sites in a day and compared with the subscales of the Ryffs psychological well-being and the total psychological well-being (PWB) among the low, medium and high-income groups in Telangana state aged between 18 to 24 years.

The data collected was organized using Microsoft Excel. Later, the data were analyzed with SPSS Statistics (2017) version 25.0. Further, the Chi-Square test is performed to test the hypotheses, and ANOVA is used to find whether the differences between and within the groups are significant between social networking usage and psychological well-being and its subscales for the total sample.

Table 1: Frequency and distribution of respondents according to Age

		Frequency	Percentage
Age	Between 18 and 21 years	447	70.95%
	Between 21 and 24 years	183	29.05%
Total		630	100%

* Mean, Mode, Median, Standard Deviation, Range of Psychological Well Being and its sub-scales

Table 3 : Family Income and Usage of Social Networking sites

Family income * How many hours do you spend on SNS in a day?

Crosstab

			How many hours do you spend on SNS in a day?			
			Less than 1 hour	More than 1 hour	More than 5 hours	Less than 1 hour in a week
Family income	Below 60k	F	46	115	79	13
		%	18.2%	45.5%	31.2%	5.1%
	Between 60k – 2lakh	F	48	176	130	10
		%	13.2%	48.4%	35.7%	2.7%
	Between 2L – 5L	F	27	65	41	5
		%	19.6%	47.1%	29.7%	3.6%
	Between 5L – 10 L	F	11	22	26	1
		%	18.3%	36.7%	43.3%	1.7%
	Above 10L	F	6	14	8	2
		%	20.0%	46.7%	26.7%	6.7%
Total		F	138	392	284	31
		%	16.3%	46.4%	33.6%	3.7%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.974 ^a	12	.371

Table2*

	Autonomy	Environmental Mastery	Personal Growth	Positive Relationship With others	Purpose in Life	Self-Acceptance	Total Psychological well being
N	630	630	630	630	630	630	630
Mean	8.4714	9.7460	8.6444	10.3778	10.7206	9.1556	57.1159
Std. Error of Mean	.14590	.13326	.12808	.13789	.14054	.13446	.54676
Median	8.0000	10.0000	9.0000	10.0000	11.0000	9.0000	56.0000
Mode	9.00	9.00	9.00	10.00	9.00	9.00	54.00
Std. Deviation	3.66199	3.34487	3.21472	3.46091	3.52751	3.37501	13.72351
Range	18.00	18.00	18.00	18.00	18.00	18.00	107.00
Minimum	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	18.00
Maximum	21.00	21.00	21.00	21.00	21.00	21.00	125.00

The data from Table 3 shows that most respondents, around 47%, use SNS for more than 1 hour, followed by 33.6% use more than 5 hours a day. Only 3.7% of people are using SNS for less than 1 hour a week. The chi-square value is 0.371 at 12 degrees of freedom. Since the p-value is more than 0.05, it is found that there is no significant relationship between people's family income and the amount of time they spend on SNS a day. Therefore, **the null hypothesis (H1o) is accepted, and the alternative hypothesis (H1a) is rejected.**

Table 4: Time spent by people in 60000-5 lakh on SNS in a day

Family income				PWBL			Total
				:LOW	MODERATE	HIGH	
Between 60k – 5L	How many hours do you spend on SNS in a day?	Less than 1 hour in a week	Count	19	25	2	46
			%	41.3%	54.3%	4.3%	100.0%
		Less than 1 hour	Count	69	106	2	177
			%	39.0%	59.9%	1.1%	100.0%
		More than 1 hour	Count	62	69	3	134
			%	46.3%	51.5%	2.2%	100.0%
		More than 5 hours	Count	12	0	0	12
			%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Total		Count	162	200	7	369
			%	43.9%	54.2%	1.9%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

Family income		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Below 60k	Pearson Chi-Square	5.231	6	.515
Between 60k – 5L	Pearson Chi-Square	19.876	6	.003
Above 5L	Pearson Chi-Square	.852	3	.837

Table 4 describes the Chi-square value for Social networking usage and psychological well-being for the different income groups. The SNS usage measured here is the time respondents spend on SNS daily. The chi-square value of below 60K is 0.515, which is above 0.05; there is no relationship found between usage and psychological well-being. For the 60k – 5L income group, the p-value is 0.003, which is below 0.05; hence, there is a **significant relationship** between **usage and psychological well-being**. For above 5L, no significant relationship is found between SNS usage and psychological well-being.

Table 5: ANOVA results for the different dimensions of Psychological well-being for between 60k – 5L Income Level

			ANOVA					
Family income			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Sig.
Between 60k – 5L	Autonomy	Between Groups	65.939	3	21.980	1.864	0.135	NS
		Within Groups	4303.530	365	11.790			
		Total	4369.469	368				
	Environmental Mastery	Between Groups	11.995	3	3.998	.394	0.757	NS
		Within Groups	3701.783	365	10.142			
		Total	3713.778	368				
	Personal Growth	Between Groups	46.923	3	15.641	1.663	0.175	NS
		Within Groups	3432.367	365	9.404			
		Total	3479.290	368				
	Positive Relationships with others	Between Groups	87.061	3	29.020	2.426	0.065	NS
		Within Groups	4366.944	365	11.964			
		Total	4454.005	368				
	Purpose in Life	Between Groups	170.633	3	56.878	5.174	0.002	Significant
		Within Groups	4012.088	365	10.992			
		Total	4182.721	368				
	Self Acceptance	Between Groups	43.114	3	14.371	1.366	0.253	NS
		Within Groups	3841.130	365	10.524			
		Total	3884.244	368				
	Total Psychological well-being	Between Groups	1639.206	3	546.402	3.414	0.018	Significant
		Within Groups	58409.818	365	160.027			
		Total	60049.024	368				

From the above table, it is found that $F(630)=5.174$, $p=0.002$, $p<0.05$; it is understood that there is a significant difference between groups and within groups of 60000-5 lakh category to the purpose in life sub-scale of psychological well-being. Subsequently, $F(630)=3.414$, $p=0.018$, $p<0.05$; therefore, it is understood that there is a significant difference between groups and within groups of 60000-5 lakh category to the total psychological well-being of respondents.

Conclusion

Our study aims to understand the relationship between income levels, the use of social networking sites, and the psychological well-being of Telangana youth. The results reveal a significant relationship between SNS usage and psychological well-being. Furthermore, the subscales studied are Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. People who are using SNS tend to have a purpose in life. Although the relationship between SNS usage and psychological well-being is established, there are limitations to this study. The data collected is cross-sectional in nature; it cannot determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the variables. The researcher used the convenience sampling method, one of the non-probability sampling methods. The non-probability sampling method prevents the researcher from generalising the findings to the population.

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