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Adolescents' Lived Experiences with Social Media and Social-Emotional Development (SED)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how adolescents in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), India, experience social media in relation to their social-emotional development. Given the predominance of quantitative research, this study focuses on adolescents' lived experiences within a complex urban sociocultural context. The study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, using semi-structured interviews and supplementary focus group discussions (FGDs) with 35 adolescents aged 14–17 years. Five themes emerged: emotional regulation, peer validation and self-concept, digital empathy and its paradoxes, relational navigation and conflict, and academic–social tension. The findings indicate that adolescents experienced social media as a simultaneously enabling and disruptive social environment, shaping emotional expression, peer relationships, information access, social comparison, and interpersonal conflict. This study further highlights the relevance of integrating social–emotional learning (SEL) and media and information literacy (MIL) to support responsible digital citizenship.

Keywords: Adolescents, digital citizenship, qualitative research, SEL, social media, social-emotional development, media and information literacy

INTRODUCTION

India's rapid digital expansion has reshaped adolescents' everyday social environments, with platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Snapchat becoming integral to communication, self-expression, and information seeking (Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI], 2024; Waghmare, 2024). This transformation is particularly relevant in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), where adolescents increasingly negotiate social interaction through digital spaces. Adolescence is also a critical period of identity formation, heightened peer orientation, and social-emotional development (Steinberg, 2014). Although these national-level patterns provide useful contextual background, they do not capture how adolescents themselves experience and interpret social-media interactions. Therefore, this study focuses on adolescents in the National Capital Region (NCR) and examines their lived experiences with social media and its implications for social-emotional development.

SEL is the gradual process of acquiring the capacity to experience, understand, articulate, and manage emotions. Adolescence is one of the most important times in a person's life for SEL, as the complexity of emotions and social interactions increases during this time. Although a substantial body of quantitative literature has examined associations between screen time and social-emotional outcomes such as empathy, emotional regulation, and peer relationships, qualitative investigations of how adolescents interpret, experience, and negotiate their social-emotional development in relation to social media remain limited, particularly in the Indian cultural context.

Urban India presents a uniquely complex sociocultural environment. Adolescents from urban India face academic pressure, extreme wealth inequality, hierarchical family structures, and evolving gender norms, all of which guide their digital behavior. The coexistence of traditional social values and digital modernity creates a distinctive sociocultural context that remains insufficiently represented in predominantly Global North research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SEL involves the development of competencies related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). These competencies are particularly important during adolescence, a developmental period marked by identity exploration, heightened peer orientation, and changing social-emotional capacities. In the Indian context, shifting family and community structures increasingly intersect with digitally mediated forms of social interaction and support. Social media may therefore provide an important context in which adolescents develop, express, and negotiate social-emotional competencies.

Effects of Social Media on Adolescent Psychosocial Development

Earlier research on social media and adolescent well-being indicated negative associations, particularly among girls (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). However, more recent meta-analyses have challenged these conclusions. These analyses suggest that a better understanding requires studying the nuance of digital use—passive vs. active. The outcomes also depend on platform characteristics, social context, and individual differences.

More recent research suggests that understanding adolescents and social media requires consideration of the complexity and variability of social media use. Maheux et al. (2025) reported that the associations between social media use and adolescent development may vary across developmental stages and individual differences. This approach relates to our study, as adolescents may use social media for many different functions, including communication, entertainment, self-expression, peer validation, and information gathering.

Prior research has focused primarily on the risks of adolescent social media use, yet more recent research has focused on the importance of differentiating forms of digital interaction and considering individual and situational contexts (Odgers & Jensen, 2020a, 2020b).

Empirical data continue to support the need for more precision in interpretation. In a recent systematic review and meta-analysis, Fassi et al. (2024) reported an association between social media use and internalizing symptoms, along with substantial interstudy variability. These findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and negative outcomes cannot be understood solely in terms of frequency or duration.

Many adolescents turn to social media for activities such as co-rumination and social comparison. These behaviors can intensify social comparisons and lead to increasingly negative outcomes. Conversely, social media has been reported to engender feelings of peer belonging through online social support and

collaborative content creation with like-minded peers. Supportive comments and online social support activities have been correlated with increased self-efficacy in social interactions. Social capital provides a framework for understanding how social media can give adolescents a ‘sense of connection’ through the creation of new social connections.

This mix of potential risks and benefits is similar to the findings of Sala et al. (2024), who performed an umbrella review and drew conclusions regarding social media use and youth social-mental well-being. It is clear that social media cannot be viewed as purely beneficial or detrimental; instead, the specific ways it is used, the contextual elements of social media, and the individual differences among youth should be the primary focus.

Indian Adolescents and Digital Media: Contextual Considerations

More studies focusing specifically on Indian adolescent digital behavior have emerged in recent years, although most remain quantitative. Indian adolescents have high levels of social media engagement, influenced by peer conformity and fear of missing out (FOMO). Multiple studies have reported significant associations between Instagram use, particularly the use of image manipulation, and body image dissatisfaction among urban Indian girls (Shukla & Srivastava, 2023). Recent qualitative research has also begun to examine how Indian adolescents perceive and experience social media and its implications for their well-being (Taddi et al., 2024). Research from the Delhi/NCR context has further examined social media’s role in adolescent ecology, highlighting its relevance to adolescents’ social, educational, and everyday experiences (Arora & Chander, 2024). However, qualitative investigations that examine how adolescents interpret and experience social media’s influence on their social-emotional development remain limited.

The international literature does not account for the Indian sociocultural context, including the pressure of competitive examinations (JEE, NEET, board examinations), caste hierarchies, multilingual communication, parental surveillance and control over digital use, gender hierarchies, and the aspirational role of social media in identity construction among first-generation smartphone users from lower-income families. These context-specifics necessitate localized, qualitative research designs.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory and Bandura’s Social Learning Theory

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes that development occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation. Digital technologies can therefore function as mediating environments through which adolescents

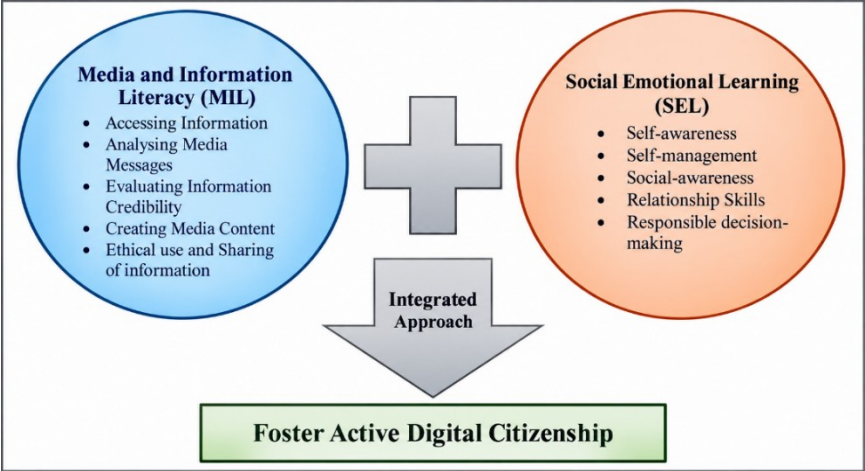
encounter guidance, feedback, language, and peer perspectives that may shape how they interpret and negotiate social-emotional experiences.

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) complements this perspective by emphasizing observation, modeling, and social reinforcement. Within digital environments, adolescents may observe peers, influencers, and content creators; interpret the consequences associated with particular forms of expression; and incorporate or resist observed behaviors. Together, the two theories provide complementary interpretive lenses: Vygotsky foregrounds the social and cultural mediation of meaning, whereas Bandura highlights observational learning and reinforcement in digitally mediated interactions.

The theoretical perspectives were used as interpretive rather than deductive coding frameworks. Initial IPA analysis was conducted ideographically from participants' accounts without imposing predefined theoretical categories. After within-case and cross-case interpretation, Vygotsky's and Bandura's concepts were used as sensitizing lenses to deepen the interpretation of emerging patterns. SEL and MIL were then used to organize the conceptual implications of these patterns and to discuss their relevance to adolescents' digital citizenship. Thus, the theories informed interpretation and discussion rather than functioning as predetermined coding categories.

To conceptualize the relationship between digital engagement and adolescent development, the study integrates media and information literacy (MIL) and social-emotional learning (SEL). MIL provides competencies for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and ethically sharing information and media (Wilson et al., 2011), whereas SEL encompasses self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Their integration provides a conceptual lens for understanding how adolescents negotiate digital information, emotional experiences, peer relationships, and responsible participation in online spaces.

Figure 1
Integrated Framework of MIL and SEL for Fostering Digital Citizenship



Note: Author-developed framework informed by the CASEL SEL Framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020), Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, and UNESCO’s Media and Information Literacy framework (Wilson et al., 2011).

The conceptual framework integrates media and information literacy (MIL) and SEL as complementary domains for understanding responsible digital citizenship. MIL provides critical capacities for evaluating and creating digital content, whereas SEL supports emotional regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Their integration is particularly relevant to digitally mediated adolescent interactions, including communication, cyberbullying, and identity expression. The framework therefore provides a lens for interpreting the findings of the present study on emotional regulation, peer validation, and online social interaction.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What is the role of social media in the emotional lives of adolescents (residing in the NCR), in their own words?

RQ2: How do adolescents perceive social media as influencing their relationship skills and social awareness?

RQ3: What challenges did adolescents perceive social media as presenting in relation to their social-emotional development?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Context

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to explore how adolescents understand and make sense of their lived experiences with social media and its perceived relationship with their social-emotional development. An IPA is concerned with a detailed examination of how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to personally significant experiences, with particular attention given to idiographic analysis and the interpretative relationship between participants and researchers (Smith et al., 2009). This approach was considered appropriate because the research questions focused on adolescents' subjective accounts of how social media was experienced within their emotional, interpersonal, and everyday social lives.

Participants and Sampling

Thirty-five adolescents, aged 14–17 years, participated in this study. They were selected from six schools across the NCR, including both government and private schools in urban Delhi, Noida, and Gurugram. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity in terms of sex, socioeconomic status, school type, and geographic location within the NCR. Maximum variation sampling was also employed to capture the variation in participants' social media usage patterns.

Although a sample of 35 participants is larger than is typical of many conventional IPA studies, the sample was intentionally designed to capture variation in adolescents' lived experiences across gender, socioeconomic background, school type, and geographic location within the NCR. The larger sample was not intended to establish a prevalence or statistical generalization. An idiographic orientation was retained by examining individual participant accounts in depth before cross-case interpretations were developed.

Socioeconomic status was assessed using self-reported monthly family income and was included as a criterion for ensuring socioeconomic diversity within the sample. Participants were categorized into lower-income, middle-income, and higher-income groups according to the predefined monthly family-income ranges reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant demographic profile (N = 35)

Characteristic	Category	Total (n)
Gender	Male	18
	Female	17
Age Group	14-15 years	19
	16-17 years	16
School Type	Government	16
	Private	19
Location	Urban Delhi	22
	NCR (Noida/Gurgaon)	13
Daily SM Use	1-2 hours	9
	3-4 hours	18
	5+ hours	8
Socioeconomic Status	Lower-income (< ₹30,000/month)	9
	Middle-income (₹30,000–₹60,000/month)	14
	Higher-income (> ₹60,000/month)	12

Participants were assigned unique identification codes (P1–P35) to protect confidentiality. Only participants who were active users of at least two social media platforms were included in the study. A preinterview screening questionnaire was administered to confirm the regular use of these platforms.

Descriptive information on participants’ social media use, including platform preferences and self-reported daily engagement, was collected to contextualize the qualitative findings.

Table 2
Social Media Platform Usage and Engagement (n = 35)

Platform	Users (n)	Average Daily Use (hours)
Instagram	30	2.8
YouTube	32	3.2
WhatsApp	33	2.5
Snapchat	18	1.9
Short-video apps	21	2.3

Note. The participants were able to cite multiple social media platforms they used. The average daily use is the participants' reported average time spent on each platform.

For most participants, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram fulfilled the purposes of communication, content consumption, peer interaction and self-expression. Participants engaged with these platforms numerous times daily, suggesting that these social media platforms are part of adolescents' social lives. The results of the interviews revealed that social media served the function of maintaining peer relationships. In addition, social media was used for emotional coping and the expression of identity.

The authors analyzed the emotions of participants regarding their social media use through their accounts of their experiences, interpretations and responses to digital interactions.

Social media use was reported to be emotionally ambivalent, with participants' accounts showing both emotionally supportive and disruptive use. Participants reported emotional support and entertainment through social media use, whereas others reported social media use to be socially anxious to produce feelings of comparison and emotional distress. Among participants, these experiences occurred simultaneously, which suggests that the emotional meaning of social media was dependent on use and context and was not positive or negative in a blanket manner.

Data collection

There were two primary methods with which data were collected between January 2025 and April 2025. The first method involved interviewing all 35 participants in a semistructured manner. These interviews were 45 and 75 minutes long. The interviews were conducted in Hindi or English as per the preference of the participant. Bilingual interviewers were present where needed. This interview was designed to understand the participants' social media habits and their emotional responses to online interactions. The mode of digital interactions related to their social lives offline was also explored.

The second method involved two focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with participants drawn from the interview sample: one FGD with eight female participants and another with seven male participants. FGDs were conducted to elicit group-level discussions and explore how adolescents constructed meaning from their digital interactions. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes. All the interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with participant and parental consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The semistructured interviews constituted the primary dataset for the IPA analysis, as they enabled detailed examination of each participant's lived

experience. The FGDs were used as supplementary data to contextualize and enrich the interpretation of shared meanings and points of convergence and divergence across participants. FGD material was not treated as an independent unit of idiographic IPA but was used to contextualize and corroborate interpretations emerging from the individual interviews.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, with emphasis on participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to their social media experiences. Following established IPA principles (Smith et al., 2009), the analysis proceeded ideographically: each interview transcript was read repeatedly, descriptive and interpretive notes were developed, emergent experiential themes were identified within individual cases, and connections and divergences were subsequently examined across cases. The researchers moved iteratively between individual accounts, developing interpretations, and the overall thematic structure.

After the analysis of individual cases, descriptions and interpretations were examined for points of convergence, divergence, and experiential significance. This iterative movement between individual cases and cross-case interpretation supported the development of the five overarching themes. The Vygotskian and Bandurian perspectives were introduced after the initial idiographic analysis as an interpretive lens for examining how social interaction, cultural mediation, observation, modeling, and social reinforcement could help explain participants' accounts. SEL and MIL were used primarily in the subsequent interpretation and discussion to connect the findings with social-emotional competencies and responsible digital participation.

NVivo 14 was used to organize, code, retrieve, and manage the qualitative dataset. The software served as an organisational tool and did not determine the interpretive process. Two researchers reviewed a subset of the transcripts and engaged in reflexive discussion of emerging interpretations, alternative readings, and potential researcher assumptions. Differences in interpretation were discussed collaboratively, and the developing interpretive framework was refined through this process.

Negative case analysis was used to identify participant accounts that challenged or complicated emerging interpretations. These counterexamples were examined alongside the dominant patterns to refine the interpretation and avoid treating adolescents' experiences of social media as uniform.

The purpose was to avoid building a structure that confirmed the hypotheses and instead provide a final structure that expressed the full extent of the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria were used to assess the trustworthiness of the data and analytical process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement was used to enhance credibility, and participants were invited to review the summary findings. The context of each participant was taken into account to support transferability. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail maintained throughout the data collection and analysis. Confirmability was addressed through researcher reflexivity statements documenting the researchers' assumptions and interpretive decisions.

The position of adult researchers with professional investments in the outcome of this study is duly acknowledged, and this has been actively reflected during data collection and analysis to minimize the need to impose adult-normative interpretations on adolescent experiences.

Ethical Considerations

A written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, along with written assent from all participants, since they were all minors. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of participant identification codes (P1–P35). The study did not report participants' names, schools, or other identifying personal details.

RESULTS

Five overarching themes emerged from the interpretive analysis: (1) social media as an emotional regulation space; (2) peer validation and self-concept formation; (3) digital empathy and its paradoxes; (4) relational navigation and conflict; and (5) academic–social tension and digital awareness. Together, these themes reflect how adolescents interpreted and negotiated social media experiences across emotional, interpersonal, and academic contexts.

Theme 1: Social Media as an Emotional Regulation Space

A pattern among participants' accounts was that some participants used social media for emotional processing and regulation. Participants used Instagram and WhatsApp while distressed and as emotionally safe spaces. Social media provides a means to find some comfort and engage in distraction, easing the strain of family and academic duties and, in general, the stress of demanding moments. This is articulated by P1 (16, female) with notable clarity:

I just open Instagram and scroll; it can't even begin to solve the problems of

the real world, but it helps me breathe for a minute or two when my parents are having another fight or when I have school stress from exams. Memes and reels make me feel less alone with the feelings I am experiencing.

P6 (15, male) described a similar pattern but with a gender-specific dimension:

Even at school, boys do not discuss feelings. On YouTube, I find Vloggers. They also suffer from performance anxiety and stress at home. Because of them, I also have understood my feelings better. As they say in words which I could not.

As such, when analyzing parasocial relationships, a number of participants, concentrated around 14- and 15-year-old girls, described social media influencers and creators the same way they would describe friends. The participants attributed their social media influencers with the ability to support and aid them emotionally. With these personalities, they provide a means of emotional expression that is lacking in their social environments. P21 (14, female) noted:

I subscribe to this mental health page on Instagram. She shares concerns and self-care. I snapshot her posts. She describes the things I feel but that I could not describe to my parents or even to my friends.

The flipside also remains true—there are anxiety-inducing dimensions of this emotional space. P17 (17, female) reflected on a downward spiral:

At other times, I proceed to feel better, and then I see all the highlights of everyone—the trips, scores, and achievements—and then I feel worse than I was before. You are aware that it is not a reality but nonetheless, it strikes.

A negative case emerged in the account of P13 (14, male), which challenged the interpretation of social media primarily as an emotional regulation space. Unlike participants who described social media as a source of emotional comfort, reflection, or distraction, P13, a participant from a government school, described YouTube primarily as an educational and aspirational resource. Rather than turning to social media to manage distress, P13 emphasized its role in accessing learning opportunities and career-related information that were otherwise financially inaccessible. This countercase suggests that the relevance of social media to participants' emotions differs on the basis of socioeconomic status, educational opportunities, and the functions for which participants use social media. P13 is covered in greater detail in Theme 5.

From a Vygotskian perspective, these data suggest that for adolescents, emotional understanding and regulation are culturally and socially mediated as opposed to being individual. Participants experienced social media as a digitally mediated environment in which they encountered emotional language, peer

perspectives, and models of coping that were not available in their social environments. P6 describes how he was able to understand and verbalize the anxiety that he had about performing in school because of the creative online personalities that he was able to observe and engage with.

Similarly, P21 was able to describe her emotions such that she was previously unable to communicate to her parents and friends because of the emotional, mental health-related content that she encountered online. In this sense, social media operated not simply as a technological tool but also as a socially mediated context through which adolescents interpreted and made meaning of their emotional experiences. Moreover, P17's account suggests that these mediated experiences can also introduce comparison and distress, indicating that the developmental significance of digital interactions may vary with how adolescents interpret and engage with the models and social feedback available online.

Theme 2: Peer Validation and Self-Concept Formation

The second high-profile theme that emerged was peer validation (likes, comments, views, and followers) through social media. These forms of feedback can encourage social comparison and feedback seeking, making online evaluations particularly salient to adolescents' self-perceptions (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). The participants demonstrated an awareness of the significance of these forms of feedback while simultaneously expressing ambivalence about their emotional significance. P16 (15, female) described the experience:

I left a photo, and I continued to check the likes every ten minutes during the first two hours. When it got a lot of likes, I felt good about myself. The following day, however, I published something, and it received hardly any. I cannot tell why it was so important, but it was--it was.

This account also aligns with established work on adolescent self-perception, relational evaluation, and identity development, which helps contextualize why visible online feedback may become salient to adolescents' self-concept (Castro-Romero & Lee, 2024; Harter, 2012; Leary, 2005).

Male participants generally placed less emphasis on visible forms of peer validation, such as likes, comments, views, and followers, although validation remained important in relation to their online gaming and technical content. This, however, was substituted by worries about their performance on gaming videos or technical skills shared online. P15 (16, male) described the experience:

It feels good when I post my gaming clips and they receive views and comments such as (bro, you a pro). As you are known by something. At school, nobody cares about gaming but online; you have a community.

Self-identity experimentation also occurred through social media. Several

participants described maintaining alternative Instagram accounts under different usernames, which they used to experiment with aspects of their identity and self-expression. These accounts suggest that alternative accounts provided spaces for adolescents to experiment with aspects of identity—including artistic, political, and relational self-expression—that they perceived as difficult to express offline. The same peer validation is desired for other views that they have not tried offline—social media has a safe testing ground. P17 stated:

I have a second account where I post poetry and dark art. Nobody from school follows it. On that account, I can be more real about how I feel. My main account is essentially a performance for relatives and school friends.

From the perspective of Bandura's social learning theory, these findings suggest that adolescents' self-concept and self-presentation are shaped through observation, modeling, and social reinforcement within digital environments. Participants observed how peers, influencers, and content creators presented themselves and received social feedback, while likes, views, and comments potentially reinforced particular forms of self-presentation. P15's experience illustrates how online recognition reinforced a valued aspect of their identity that received limited recognition at school, whereas P17's use of an alternative account suggests how adolescents may experiment with identities across different social audiences. Thus, social media provided a context in which self-concept was negotiated through the interplay of observed models, individual behavior, and social feedback.

Theme 3: Digital Empathy and its Paradoxes

Empathy in the digital space emerged as a common topic, albeit with its contradictions. The respondents recounted the moments when they felt more enlightened and more empathetic after having read new viewpoints on the internet, social causes and emotional stories, which they might not have thought about before. P16 (15, female) described how social media expanded its social horizon:

Prior to Instagram, I was not aware of either farmer protests or LGBTQ concerns. I began to read about it, and it altered my perceptions toward people. Similarly, now I will go out of my way to figure out why other people do not think like the way I do.

Conversely, many participants are aware of performative empathy in online spaces. Many participants admit to engaging with social causes superficially for social capital. P26 (16, male) said:

All people update their DP at some tragedy or write a black square or something. The majority of us are not aware of what is going on. I do it, because everybody does and you will be considered to have a heartless heart.

There is an extension of this theme that includes online bullying, such as online harassment, exclusion, and gossip. Participants said that incidents that happen online can be particularly distressing because online interactions can go beyond immediate social interactions and can be saved and shared after the incident. Some participants said that online conflicts cannot be escaped like conflicts that happen offline because online interactions can last forever. P15 (16, male) explained:

In school, if someone says something mean, it ends when the school bell rings. Online, it stays. The screenshot remains. Other people keep seeing it. You cannot truly escape it even at home.

Theme 4: Relational Navigation and Conflict in Digital Spaces

This theme captures how adolescents use social media to manage and maintain relationships and navigate interpersonal tensions. The adolescents interviewed reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media actually served to deepen and maintain relationships. Many participants also described developing new friendships online during this period. Such changes are consistent with the broader transformation of adolescent peer relationships within social media contexts, where digital platforms can alter how adolescents initiate, maintain, and experience peer relationships (Nesi et al., 2018). P6 described the interaction opportunities given by WhatsApp groups:

Our class group on WhatsApp is honestly where most of the real friendships are occurring. Sharing notes, sharing memes, planning stuff. Without it, I think that many people in my class would not actually be friends in the way they are now.

However, the same digital infrastructure can be used to fuel tensions and cause emotional harm. “Screenshot culture,” involving the capture and sharing of private conversations, emerged as a significant source of interpersonal conflict. The participants described the sharing of private screenshots as a significant source of perceived trustworthiness violation and interpersonal distress. P20 (15, female) recalled:

My best friend sent my private message to someone in our group. It spreads everywhere. I did not come to school for three days. Even now, six months later, I do not trust anyone with personal things on WhatsApp.

The participants also described increasing complexity of romantic relationships due to social media. Some romantic relationships were formed and dissolved via social media sites, highlighting that those digital spaces both facilitated romantic communication and intensified the emotional stakes of relationship conflict, given the social visibility of digital interactions.

Theme 5: Academic-Social Tension and Digital Well-Being Awareness

The final theme addressed participants' experiences of social media in relation to their academic lives in both positive and negative ways. Nearly all of the participants described experiencing conflict between studying and social media use, framing this in both practical and moral terms, feeling guilty about screen time, attempting self-regulation strategies, and negotiating parental restrictions. P15 (16, male) described the participant's attempts at self-regulation:

I tried putting my phone in another room while studying, but I kept thinking about notifications. I then deleted Instagram for two weeks. The first three days were actually quite peaceful. Afterward, I reinstalled because I felt completely out of the loop.

Female participants described social media usage as a health concern more frequently. They used terms such as “social media detox”, “screen time limit” and “digital stress”- language clearly absorbed from the online wellness discourse that they ironically consumed on social media. This created a recursive loop: social media caused them stress, but they returned to social media to find a solution to this stress. P11 (15, female) told us:

I subscribe to social media posts on mental health, and they tell me that social media is a bad influence on my mental health. On social media, I am reading that. There's something very confusing about that.

Participants from government schools who had family incomes less than ₹30,000 a month used social media for different purposes. They looked at social media as an informational and goal-directed resource. They used YouTube to obtain access to educational content and information related to various jobs and careers. To learn and develop their English skills, these participants also used social media. As P13 stated,

I use YouTube mostly for studying and for seeing how people live. It shows me things I can become. My parents could not afford coaching, so YouTube is my coaching.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The five themes identified in this study provide a multidimensional account of how adolescents in the NCR described the relationship between social media use and their social-emotional experiences. This further helps us understand the functioning of this relationship in a clearly Indian (and more precisely, urban North Indian) sociocultural setting.

The participants' accounts also illustrate a tension between recognizing the constructed nature of online self-presentation and continuing to experience

emotional consequences from social comparison. This pattern is consistent with research emphasizing that the relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being varies across forms of use and individual and contextual differences (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Theme 3 identifies the paradoxes of digital empathy. These paradoxes contribute to an important ongoing debate in the digital education literature. While participants described social media platforms such as Instagram as expanding their access to perspectives by allowing them to access various perspectives, causes, and narratives beyond their immediate experience and to functionally expand their social awareness in CASEL terms, there are limitations due to passive exposure. As most participants recognize a level of performance in their own social media behavior, it can be inferred that they have a level of critical digital literacy. However, passive social media engagement does not necessarily translate into empathy in offline interactions, highlighting the potential role of SEL programming in strengthening the transfer of social-emotional competencies across digital and offline contexts.

The findings of theme 4 are perhaps the most direct contribution to the SEL literature. The participants' accounts of having their trust broken by screenshots or being bullied for their social media comments reveal how the affordances of digital communication—shareability and visibility—can also increase the stakes of digital communication for adolescents. These findings suggest a need for explicit scaffolding around digital communication ethics, including the ideas of digital consent and the emotional consequences of social media-mediated relational conflict (Ellison et al., 2007).

The socioeconomic dimension revealed in Theme 5 also provides an important negative case for the broader interpretation of social media as an emotional and relational space. P13's account, in which YouTube functioned primarily as an educational and aspirational resource, challenged the assumption that adolescents engage with social media principally for emotional regulation, peer validation, or relational purposes. P13's account suggests that the meaning and significance that adolescents attach to social media may vary with socioeconomic conditions and access to alternative educational resources. This could differentiate approaches to digital literacy within social media. Participants from the lower socioeconomic sector who attend government schools also contributed to adolescents' social media use, thereby illustrating that participants' social media use was heterogeneous. This points to the value of resource-sensitive approaches to digital literacy. This finding is consistent with Livingstone and Helsper's (2010) digital inequality framework and suggests that variations in income and class are as significant as gender- or age-based variations among Indian adolescents.

Implications for Educators and School Counsellors

The findings suggest that schools in the NCR and comparable urban contexts could consider structured SEL programs that explicitly address the digital dimensions of emotional and social life. School counsellors should provide training to discuss the emotional implications of social media without pathologizing adolescent digital engagement. Social media interactions can be seen as normal and usually a beneficial component of an adolescent's social life. However, teens may need counseling to help them process the negative usage of social media platforms, such as digital exclusion and screenshots, to betray their trust.

Implications for Policy

The National Education Policy 2020 includes provisions related to health and well-being education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Digital literacy and well-being may be integrated into the formal curriculum through such provisions. Policymakers should leverage this framework to develop India-specific digital citizenship curricula that consider socioeconomic and gender disparities.

Implications for parents

The participants' accounts suggest that restrictive approaches alone may not address the social and emotional meanings adolescents attach to social media. Parents are encouraged to engage in open, nonjudgmental conversations about their children's online social lives. Parental awareness of the emotional significance of social media interactions for adolescents is a prerequisite for effective support.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn exclusively from NCRs; the findings may not be transferable to adolescents in rural India or other urban regions, since there are significant cultural variations within India. Second, the qualitative design, while enabling in-depth exploration, does not allow for generalizations to be made about the prevalence of these experiences. Third, participants may have modified their answers to be more socially desirable. Fourth, the rapid evolution of social media platforms means that findings concerning any specific platform will be valid for only a short period of time. Future research should use primarily longitudinal studies to improve the range of ecological validity of studies throughout rural and semiurban settings.

Conclusion

This study focuses on Indian teenagers living in the NCR area. It examines how adolescents use social media and how they perceive its relationship with their social and emotional development. Using a qualitative research method with 35 participants, the research shows how social media serves multiple functions, including being a refuge for students to express themselves, a means to gain peer validation, a medium that can help develop empathy only if used correctly, a learning tool, and a source of stress for these adolescents. The participants' accounts suggested that the meanings and functions of social media varied across gender, socioeconomic context, school setting, and family circumstances.

These findings do not show a black-and-white case of social media causing teens to become more emotionally stunted or socially and emotionally mature. In fact, they show a more complex picture of the situation, illustrating the seamless integration of technology into teens' lives. The goal of the Indian educational system, parents, and policy makers is not to prevent the use of social media by adolescents but to empower them and adults in their lives with ethics and emotional intelligence to use digital platforms safely and positively. In this task, SEL frameworks offer an indispensable guide.

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