



Navigating the Digital Labyrinth: Social Media, Self-Esteem, Coping, and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Social media is now central to student life, reshaping how college students learn, connect, and cope with stress. This study explored patterns of social networking use among 360 Indian college students, examining links with self-esteem, psychological well-being, and stress coping styles. Using standardized tools (Social Networking Usage Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Psychological Well-Being Scale, and Brief COPE Scale), findings showed academic-oriented use dominated, reflecting a shift toward digital platforms as tools for learning and collaboration. Self-esteem did not significantly predict usage patterns, but psychological well-being—especially self-awareness—and approach coping strategies, like planning and active coping, were strongly linked with academic use. The results highlight social media’s growing relevance in education and mental health.

KEYWORDS

Social Media Usage, Self-Esteem, College Students, Social Networking, Digital Behavior

INTRODUCTION

The daily lives of college students have been infiltrated with social media as it is actively shaping how they learn, connect, and cope with academic and personal challenges. Grounded in the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1973), the present study seeks to examine how self-esteem, stress coping styles, and psychological well-being predict distinct patterns of social media usage, such as academic, socialization, entertainment, and informativeness, among the Indian college students. Although previous research links social media usage with well-being and self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006), the findings remain inconsistent, as it is underlined by both contextual and cultural complexities.

In the Indian context, social networking platforms have become indispensable to digital learning and socialization, but negligent empirical work actually explores how psychological factors could interact with cultural norms to influence the usage patterns. For example, collectivistic values might influence the students to seek social validation and belongingness on online platforms, while educational and gender-based norms might shape academic or entertainment-related usage. The

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current research fills these gaps by combining psychological and cultural determinants within the UGT framework to understand the digital behaviors in a higher education context.

Theoretical Framework

UGT (Katz et al., 1979) posits that the users actively select media to fulfill specific needs, such as seeking information, connection, and entertainment.

Within this context, self-esteem, stress coping styles, and psychological well-being represent the psychological motivators underlying these gratifications. Self-esteem influences the extent to which the users seek validation or identity formation online (Cast & Burke, 2002; Festinger, 1957). The stress coping styles decide whether social media usage functions as a medium for support and problem-solving (approach coping) or as avoidance and distraction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985). Psychological well-being reflects the capacity to engage positively in digital environments (Ryff & Singer, 1996).

By locating these psychological constructs within the UGT framework, the present study theorizes digital behavior as a function of both internal psychological needs and the unique contextual factors. This holistic approach contributes to the larger theoretical base by identifying whether social media usage reflects self-directed gratification or a mechanism of stress coping and self-regulation in a collectivistic, academic environment.

Social Networking Usage and Psychological Predictors

Previous research on self-esteem and social media reveals contradictory outcomes, as it operates as both positive self-enhancement (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) versus detrimental social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014). On a similar note, the stress coping styles influence engagement patterns: students employ approach coping may use social media for academic collaboration and informational support, whereas avoidant coping often predicts entertainment-driven usage (Frison & Eggermont, 2015; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). Psychological well-being, encompassing autonomy, personal growth, and environmental mastery (Ryff & Singer, 1996), also moderates digital engagement, with it being associated with constructive use (Yue et al., 2022).

Despite extent global research, Indian studies remain few and largely descriptive in nature. Only a limited number of studies have explored how psychological constructs jointly influence patterns of social media use rather than the frequency of usage. The present study closes this gap by examining how psychological well-being, stress coping styles, and self-esteem interact to predict social networking use motivations among Indian college students.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions (RQs) and hypotheses are as follows:

RQ1. How does self-esteem influence the purpose of social media use among Indian college students?

H1. Higher self-esteem will relate to greater academic and informative use, while lower self-esteem will relate to greater entertainment and socialization use.

RQ2. What stress coping styles are associated with different patterns of social media use?

H2. Students using approach coping (problem-focused, seeking support) will show more academic and informative use.

H3. Students using avoidant coping (distraction, withdrawal) will show more entertainment-oriented use.

RQ3. How does psychological well-being relate to patterns of social networking usage?

H4. Lower well-being will associate with entertainment/social use.

H5. Higher well-being will associate with academic/informative use.

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