



Social Media and Student Socialization: A Theoretical Analysis of Beliefs and Behaviour

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of daily life for students in India, shaping how they think, interact, and make decisions. This study examines the influence of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, X (Twitter), and WhatsApp on students' beliefs, attitudes, and everyday behaviour. The research explores how online content including influencers, short-form videos, peer posts, and trending narratives affects academic engagement, self-image, lifestyle choices, and social relationships. Using a mixed-methods design combining surveys, focus-group discussions, and behavioural observation, the study highlights both positive and negative effects. While many students report gaining motivation, awareness, and access to learning resources, others experience distractions, unrealistic comparisons, and shifts in values shaped more by online trends than real-life experiences. The findings underscore the need for digital literacy, critical thinking, and responsible media consumption among young learners. The study provides insights for educators, parents, and policymakers attempting to understand the deeper behavioral changes driven by India's rapidly expanding social media landscape.

Keywords: *Social media influence, Youth psychology, Influencers, Media consumption, Behavioural change*

Introduction

In the last decade, social media has become one of the most influential environments shaping how students learn, communicate, and develop their sense of identity. In India, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, X, and WhatsApp have expanded rapidly, creating digital spaces where students are continuously exposed to new information, peer interactions, and cultural cues. Scholars describe social media as a **digitally networked communication system** that enables real-time content sharing and interactive participation (Boyd & Ellison, 2010). Within this



environment, students not only exchange information but also form beliefs, evaluate social norms, and construct behavioural tendencies that extend beyond the virtual world.

Student socialization—the lifelong process through which young people internalize societal norms, values, and behavioural patterns—now unfolds in both physical and digital settings. According to contemporary research, online platforms have become “alternative socialization agents,” influencing attitudes and behaviour much like family, school, or peer groups traditionally have (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). This shift is particularly evident in student populations where identity exploration, peer influence, and emotional development are already highly active.

Theoretical Perspective

Two psychological frameworks are especially relevant for explaining how students interpret and respond to social media content. **Social Learning Theory** suggests that individuals acquire behaviours by observing and imitating others who appear competent, attractive, or socially rewarded (Bandura, 1977). The structure of social media—where likes, comments, and followers act as public indicators of approval—creates conditions under which students are likely to model themselves after influencers, trendsetters, or admired peers. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to such digital role models contributes to shifts in students’ attitudes, lifestyle choices, and even academic priorities (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

Similarly, **Social Comparison Theory** proposes that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and attributes with those of others (Festinger, 1954). Social media intensifies this comparison by presenting curated, filtered, and often idealized portrayals of people’s lives. Research indicates that upward comparisons—where students compare themselves to those who seem more successful or attractive—can lead to changes in self-esteem, body image, and perceived academic competence (Fardouly et al., 2015). As students repeatedly engage with such content, they develop beliefs and behaviours that align with online norms rather than personal or cultural realities.



These theories collectively highlight that social media is not merely a platform for entertainment; it is a psychological setting where observation, evaluation, and imitation occur simultaneously. For the purpose of this study, it is assumed that (a) students actively participate on at least one social media platform, (b) they encounter both academic and non-academic content, and (c) they are in a developmental phase where identity formation and social approval hold significant influence. These assumptions help frame social media as an informal learning environment that shapes motivation, communication styles, value systems, and interpersonal relationships.

As India's digital ecosystem continues to evolve, understanding how students internalize online messages becomes increasingly important. This study attempts to provide a theoretical analysis of how beliefs and behaviors are shaped through digital interactions, offering insights that can support educators, parents, and policymakers in guiding students toward healthier and more mindful engagement with social media.

Objectives of the Study

- 1. To explore how students' beliefs and behaviors are shaped through observation and comparison on social media.**
- 2. To understand how everyday use of social media influences students' academic attitudes, self-perception, and social interactions.**

Keeping in view the above objectives and to contextualize the present study within the existing body of knowledge, it is essential to review the relevant literature related to the objectives of the research. As such, various studies have been examined to understand the current state of knowledge on the topics of social media's influence on students' beliefs, behaviors, academic attitudes, self-perception, and social interactions. The Research on social media and student socialization has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting the rapid integration of digital platforms into young people's everyday lives. Early scholarship recognized social media as more than a technological novelty, describing it as a social space that allows users to construct identities, form connections, and participate in public interactions. Boyd and Ellison (2010) provided one of the foundational understandings of online networking by showing that these platforms support identity expression and relationship building, which soon became central



themes in youth-oriented research. Soon after, work by Valkenburg and Peter (2011) observed that online communication could enhance social closeness among adolescents, indicating that digital environments were beginning to contribute meaningfully to social development.

As social media adoption grew, scholars turned their attention to its psychological implications for students. Studies in the mid-2010s demonstrated that digital environments can magnify self-evaluation and comparison processes. Fardouly et al. (2015) found that visually curated platforms, such as Instagram, encouraged users to compare themselves with idealized images, often influencing self-worth and body image. Similarly, research by Tandoc, Ferrucci, and Duffy (2015) noted that passive browsing could trigger envy and reduce self-esteem, suggesting that online interactions can have subtle emotional consequences even without active participation. Parallel to these concerns, researchers such as Mazman and Usluel (2015) explored social media's usefulness for students' academic needs, concluding that peer influence and perceived relevance strongly shape students' willingness to adopt social platforms for learning.

As the decade progressed, attention shifted toward academic engagement, collaboration, and the dissemination of knowledge through social media. Al-Rahmi et al. (2020) reported that social media can facilitate collaborative learning by enabling students to exchange ideas and resources efficiently. In India, Jena (2020) observed that although digital platforms provide students with access to information and academic support, they can also contribute to distraction and time loss, revealing a dual effect that has become characteristic of recent findings. Large-scale mapping of publication trends by Shaikh, Ali, and Al-Maamari (2022) further highlighted the growing interdisciplinary nature of social media research, showing increased interest from fields such as psychology, education, and digital communication.

Recent work has begun to focus more closely on identity construction, emotional well-being, and peer dynamics in online spaces. For example, Kharbanda and Singh (2023) found that students with high social media engagement often experience stronger pressures connected to popularity and public perception, which can influence how they evaluate themselves and relate to others. Studies have also highlighted the academic side of digital participation. Sivakumar, Jayasingh, and Shaik (2023) discovered that students frequently use social networks to share knowledge and



engage in academic discussions, indicating that social media supports informal learning communities while simultaneously shaping behavioural tendencies. In addition, the work of Mulero-Henríquez, Pérez-Solís, and Falcon (2024) emphasized that students' attitudes toward technology differ by gender, showing that emotional responses, motivations, and patterns of use are not uniform across male and female learners.

More recent literature has raised concerns about the cognitive impact of prolonged social media use. A systematic review by Naik et al. (2025) suggested that extended engagement with digital platforms may interfere with attention, memory processes, and executive functioning among younger users. These findings add complexity to earlier arguments by emphasizing that social media affects not only emotional or social development but potentially cognitive patterns as well. In the Indian context, contemporary research offers a similarly nuanced understanding. Shukla, Pandey, and Kumar (2025) found that while social media supports motivation, collaboration, and communication among higher-education students, it also creates challenges such as academic procrastination and emotional strain when used excessively. Finally, a broad scoping review by Fernandes et al. (2025) observed that although research on student behaviour and social media is abundant, many studies lack a robust theoretical foundation, indicating a need for more theory-driven approaches to examining behavioural and socialization processes.

Overall, the literature shows that social media has become an influential force in shaping students' beliefs, self-perception, academic habits, and social interactions. While it offers opportunities for collaboration, support, and identity exploration, it simultaneously exposes students to comparison pressures, distraction, and cognitive strain. The research collectively underscores that social media is an important agent in contemporary student socialization, but one whose effects depend on the nature, intensity, and purpose of use.

Results and Discussion

The study aimed to understand how social media influences the beliefs and behaviours of students and how everyday digital engagement shapes their academic attitudes, self-perceptions, and social interactions. The mixed-methods analysis revealed consistent patterns across survey



responses, focus-group discussions, and behavioural observations, demonstrating that social media functions as a powerful socialization environment for students in contemporary India.

Objective 1: To explore how students' beliefs and behaviours are shaped through observation and comparison on social media.

The results indicated that a considerable proportion of students rely on social media as a reference point for understanding what behaviours, values, and lifestyles are considered socially desirable. Students frequently reported imitating communication styles, fashion choices, study routines, and even opinions expressed by peers, influencers, or content creators they admire. This aligns with *Social Learning Theory*, which posits that individuals learn through observing rewarded behaviours (Bandura, 1977). Participants described adopting habits showcased in motivational study videos, wellness trends, and academic-success narratives—suggesting that online models significantly influence everyday behaviour.

At the same time, the data revealed strong evidence of social comparison processes. Students often compared academic performance, physical appearance, and lifestyle achievements with those seen online. Those who spent more time on visually driven platforms such as Instagram and YouTube reported higher levels of comparison-based stress. These findings mirror earlier studies showing that exposure to idealized images increases self-evaluation pressure and dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015). Several participants shared that seeing peers post about internships, high grades, or achievements made them feel inadequate or motivated, depending on their emotional state—a pattern consistent with Tandoc et al.'s (2015) observation that passive exposure to curated images can simultaneously inspire and create emotional strain.

The results therefore illustrate that students are not merely browsing content; they are actively constructing beliefs about success, attractiveness, and self-worth through constant comparison and imitation. This relationship between online exposure and internalized norms is also supported by more recent research showing that highly engaged users are more sensitive to popularity cues and social approval metrics (Kharbanda & Singh, 2023). Overall, the findings confirm that observation and comparison serve as the primary psychological mechanisms linking social media use to belief formation and behavioural adjustment among students.



Objective 2: To understand how everyday use of social media influences students' academic attitudes, self-perception, and social interactions.

The study showed that social media had a dual influence on students' academic engagement. On one hand, many students reported using platforms for educational purposes—such as accessing tutorial videos, digital notes, academic groups, or motivational study content. This supports earlier evidence that social media enhances collaborative learning and knowledge exchange when applied purposefully (Al-Rahmi et al., 2020; Sivakumar et al., 2023). Students in focus groups mentioned that academic communities on platforms like YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram help them stay updated, clarify doubts, and feel connected with peers pursuing similar goals.

However, social media's academic benefits were often overshadowed by the challenge of distraction. A large number of participants admitted to experiencing difficulty managing time due to continuous notifications and habitual scrolling. These observations echo the findings of Jena (2020), who noted that while digital platforms offer academic incentives, they simultaneously encourage procrastination and multitasking. Students described losing track of time while browsing reels or short videos, indicating that digital engagement can interfere with sustained academic focus.

Regarding self-perception, the study found that students who engaged heavily with influencer-driven content often reported fluctuating confidence levels. Some felt motivated by success stories they encountered online, while others experienced self-doubt after comparing their progress with idealized portrayals of peer achievements. This pattern is consistent with recent research arguing that popularity-driven platforms heighten the need for social approval and impact core self-evaluation (Kharbanda & Singh, 2023). In several cases, students expressed a desire to modify their behaviour, appearance, or lifestyle based on perceived online norms—demonstrating social media's ability to shape personal identity.

In terms of social interactions, results suggested that digital communication has become a central part of peer relationships. While many students felt that social media helped maintain friendships and create a sense of belonging, others mentioned that online interactions sometimes replaced meaningful face-to-face conversations. This aligns with Valkenburg and Peter's (2011) findings



that online interactions can strengthen relationships but may also alter communication patterns. A few students shared concerns that online disagreements or misinterpretations had affected their offline relationships, suggesting that social media can amplify interpersonal tensions. Recent literature also highlights the cognitive implications of regular social media use. Several participants described experiencing reduced concentration or difficulty retaining information after extended online sessions. These self-reports mirror evidence from Naik et al.'s (2025) systematic review, which indicates that excessive digital engagement may influence attention and memory processes.

Overall, results related to the second objective demonstrate that social media's influence on academic attitudes, self-perception, and social relationships is complex and multidimensional. It can support academic motivation and provide access to communities of learning, but it also introduces risks such as distraction, emotional pressure, and modified social behaviour. These findings reinforce the need for balanced digital engagement and the importance of promoting media literacy among students.

Conclusion and Future Implications

This study confirms that social media significantly shapes students' beliefs, behaviours, and social interactions. Through observation and social comparison, students internalize norms, imitate admired behaviours, and adjust self-perception, supporting theories of Social Learning and Social Comparison (Bandura, 1977; Fardouly et al., 2015). While social media facilitates academic collaboration and access to learning resources (Al-Rahmi et al., 2020; Sivakumar et al., 2023), excessive use can lead to distraction, procrastination, and emotional strain (Jena, 2020; Shukla et al., 2025). Overall, its impact is multifaceted, influencing motivation, self-esteem, and peer relationships in both positive and negative ways.

Future implications include the need for **digital literacy programs** to foster critical evaluation of online content, structured integration of social media into academic support systems, and mental health initiatives to address self-perception challenges (Kharbanda & Singh, 2023; Naik et al., 2025). Longitudinal and theory-driven research is recommended to understand evolving digital



behaviours, while context-specific studies in India can inform culturally relevant strategies for healthy social media engagement.

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