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Social Media and Social Isolation among Indian Digital Natives: Emerging Ramifications of Digital Citizenship

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Abstract. The pervasive integration of social media platforms into the daily lives of digital natives represents a complex socio-technological phenomenon with profound implications for social cohesion, psychosocial development, and mental health trajectories. Given India's diverse social fabric, understanding these dynamics is critical for societal stability and cultural continuity. The present investigation employs a quantitatively driven methodology to elucidate the nuanced relationships between social media engagement patterns and social isolation among digital natives in Delhi, a microcosm exemplifying India's rapidly digitizing demographic. Analytical results demonstrate statistically significant positive correlations: social isolation exhibits strong associations with social media usage frequency, perceived digital social support, and dependency on social media platforms. Findings substantiate the hypothesis that heightened engagement with social media – particularly among Indian digital users – correlates with attenuated face-to-face interactions, increased subjective feelings of loneliness, and exacerbated social fragmentation. Given the heterogeneity of India's social fabric, these emergent patterns of digital-induced social disintegration necessitate culturally sensitive intervention strategies. Recommendations include promoting balanced digital consumption through digital literacy programs, strengthening offline social competencies, and fostering community-based engagement initiatives – aimed at mitigating social isolation and safeguarding the social cohesion essential for India's societal stability and cultural resilience.

Keywords: social media engagement, India, digital literacy, digital culture, digital social support, youth culture

Authors' contribution. Development of the research concept, manuscript writing – Tooba Faraji; Research data collection, processing & verification of materials – Papiya Mondal;

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questionnaire design, research data analysis, manuscript writing – Sara Tabatabaei; development of the research concept and manuscript editing – Bella A. Bulgarova. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Социальные сети и социальная изоляция цифровых аборигенов Индии: последствия цифрового гражданства

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Аннотация. Внедрение социальных сетей в повседневную жизнь «цифровых аборигенов» – сложное социально-технологическое явление, имеющее глубокие последствия для социальной сплоченности, психосоциального развития и психического здоровья. Учитывая разнообразие социальной структуры Индии, понимание этой динамики имеет решающее значение для стабильности общества и культурной преемственности. В настоящем исследовании используется количественная методология для выяснения взаимосвязей между моделями вовлеченности в социальные сети и социальной изоляцией среди молодежи в Дели. Результаты анализа демонстрируют положительные корреляции: социальная изоляция демонстрирует сильную связь с частотой использования социальных сетей, ощущаемой цифровой социальной поддержкой и зависимостью от платформ социальных сетей. Полученные результаты подтверждают гипотезу о том, что повышенная вовлеченность в социальные сети, особенно среди индийских пользователей цифровых технологий, коррелирует с ослаблением коммуникаций в реальном мире, усилением субъективного чувства одиночества и социальной фрагментации. Учитывая неоднородность социальной структуры Индии, эти возникающие модели социальной дезинтеграции, вызванной цифровыми технологиями, требуют вмешательства с учетом культурных особенностей. Рекомендации включают поощрение сбалансированного цифрового потребления с помощью программ цифровой грамотности, укрепление социальных компетенций и поощрение инициатив по вовлечению местных сообществ, направленных на смягчение социальной изоляции и обеспечение сплоченности, необходимой для стабильности и культурной устойчивости Индии.

Ключевые слова: коммуникации в социальных сетях, Индия, цифровая грамотность, цифровая культура, цифровая социальная поддержка, молодежная культура

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Introduction

Social isolation, a multifaceted construct central to social sciences, psychology, and communication, signifies the weakening or severance of bonds between individuals and social structures. Seeman (1959) conceptualizes it as cognitive alienation – an estrangement from societal values – while others emphasize experiential dimensions such as loneliness, diminished social support, and pervasive feelings of alienation. Analytically, social isolation manifests across various levels, including familial relationships, community engagement, and social capital (Gunnes et al., 2024). Researchers describe it as the erosion of social participation, leading to weakened attachments and feelings of powerlessness and despair. The rise of digital platforms (Polyakov, 2022) amid increasing social distancing has supplanted face-to-face interactions, fostering superficial connections that often lack authenticity and deepen feelings of isolation (Jin, 2024). This technological shift encourages preoccupation with virtual realities, undermining the depth and quality of real-world relationships among digital citizens (Volkova et al., 2024).

As digital technologies advance, traditional relational frameworks – marked by emotional intimacy and stability – have significantly diminished for digital citizens. This has resulted in transient, superficial, and emotionally detached interactions, disrupting conventional social patterns and exacerbating isolation. While online networks broaden communication, unregulated engagement often undermines authentic connections, weakening real-world bonds and intensifying loneliness (Tabatabaei et al., 2024; Volkova et al., 2021). Scholars like Golzar-Khojeste (2024) argue that reliance on these platforms hampers genuine discourse and collective participation, while Sucharitha (2020) links excessive virtual engagement to loneliness, relationship dissolution, and depression. They further contend that prolonged digital interaction fosters emotional detachment, fragmenting familial bonds and fueling self-alienation and anxiety (Sucharitha et al., 2020). This virtual environment frequently functions as a protective barrier, insulating individuals from the tangible realities of society and thereby depriving them of substantive human connections (Sharma, 2021).

Mass media is a crucial tool in shaping societal dynamics, acting as both a mirror reflecting cultural values and an agent of change (Ochuko et al., 2025). Social media disrupt traditional loyalty patterns and foster new group affiliations, reshaping users' communication and identity constructs. Shy or vulnerable individuals often craft idealized personas online, driven by fear of rejection, which – amplified by excessive use and exposure to advertising – can distort their perception of reality. Human relationships are fundamental to identity formation, social status, and personal development, fulfilling core biological and social needs (Taneja, 2023). Prolonged engagement in virtual environments, however, constrains real-world interactions, diminishes social commitments, and fosters individualism rooted in profit motives and modern isolation, leading to loneliness and societal detachment. Given India's status as one of the most populous nations of digital citizens, understanding these evolving digital dynamics is imperative for safeguarding societal cohesion, fostering inclusive cultural narratives, and ensuring resilient community structures amidst rapid technological transformation.

In Delhi, a microcosm epitomizing India's rapidly digitizing demographic landscape, over 70% of individuals aged 18–35 actively participate in social media platforms, dedicating an average of 3.5 hours per day – surpassing the global norm – thereby underscoring a pronounced dependency. Young users frequently leverage these digital spaces to construct and project identities, cultivate or sustain interpersonal relationships, and, on occasion, fabricate fictitious personas. While virtual environments facilitate communication and serve as conduits for bridging social divides, they concurrently pose risks of engendering superficial, anonymous, and isolating interactions that may attenuate intimacy and undermine a collective sense of belonging. Despite their manifold advantages, excessive engagement with social media can intensify social alienation and attenuate the inclination toward face-to-face interactions. Consequently, as a particularly impressionable segment within the digital citizenry, youth are subjected to a diverse array of cultural stimuli that shape their attitudes, influence behavioral patterns, and redefine social bonds. Such exposure potentially erodes trust, diminishes civic participation, and fosters individualism – collectively threatening the integrity of authentic social support networks. This study endeavors to investigate: 1) the prevalence and determinants of social isolation among young residents of Delhi; 2) the impact of social media engagement on the degree of social isolation within this cohort.

Methodology

This study employs a predominantly quantitative, survey-based approach to elucidate the research phenomena. The target population encompasses all young individuals aged 18 to 35 residing within Delhi, which has an estimated demographic of approximately¹ 9 million, as Delhi population reported to be around 34,665,600 by

¹ *Population of Delhi*. (2025). Statistics Times. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/india/delhi-population.php>

the World Population Review.² This group primarily consists of digital natives – individuals who have grown up with digital technology from an early age – highlighting their familiarity and fluency with digital environments. Employing Cochran’s formula with an anticipated margin of error of 10%, the calculated sample size approximates 422 respondents. A purposive, non-probability sampling technique was utilized to select participants, aligning with the study’s specific objectives. Data collection was conducted via an online questionnaire disseminated among Delhi-based users. The research instrument is a meticulously developed questionnaire crafted by the researcher, with the unit of analysis situated at the micro level. The validity of the measurement indicators was established through face validity, while the internal consistency of the items was assessed via Cronbach’s alpha, which surpassed the threshold of 0.70, thereby affirming the instrument’s acceptable reliability.

Concept

Social Isolation. This pertains to a condition wherein an individual, influenced by specific perceptions of environmental circumstances and personal motivations, severs social interactions, resulting in a deprivation of social support. Such a state is often concomitant with experiences of loneliness, despair, and diminished willingness to partake in social activities (Romo, 2023). The construct is operationalized through three dimensions, as delineated by Simon’s theoretical framework: (1) loneliness, (2) social despair, and (3) reduced social tolerance, each measured via a ranking scale.

Digital Social Support. Defined as a reciprocal exchange whereby emotional, cognitive, and behavioral feedback serve to bolster an individual’s positive self-concept and sense of self-worth (Faraji, 2018). Within the digital realm, this support manifests through empathetic messages, social feedback, and intimacy within the network. It is evaluated across four levels: (1) informational support – access to and perception of information quality; (2) emotional support – receipt of empathetic messages and feelings of being supported; (3) companionship support – simultaneous interaction fostering a sense of belonging; and (4) advisory support – counseling and the perception of feedback quality.

Social Media dependency. This refers to the attachment and satisfaction derived from sustained engagement with online environments, conceptualized within Young’s framework as media addiction (Young, 1998). Such dependency entails an excessive allocation of time to digital spaces and a propensity to prioritize virtual interactions over real-world experiences. Individuals may also follow curated content and internalize the prevailing ideas and values within these digital environments. Virtual dependency is examined through three dimensions: (1) dependency on online content – persistent engagement with trending and sensitive material; (2) reactions to online content – involuntary and frequent responses to posts; and (3) social interaction and communication – the selection of followers and active participation in public postings.

² *Delhi Population*. (2025). World Population Review. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/india/delhi>

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the average duration of social media use is 4.41 hours per day, with observed extremes ranging from 1 hour to 17 hours. A substantial proportion of respondents (42.7 %) exhibit a high level of dependence on social media platforms (Table 1). Additionally, 47.9 % of participants’ report receiving a moderate level of support from social media and its users. Furthermore, 47.7 % of respondents’ experience moderate social isolation, characterized by feelings of loneliness, despair, and reduced social tolerance.

Table 1

Percentage distribution of Social media dependency, digital social support, and social isolation

Variable	Mean, %	Median, %	Mode, %	Standard deviation, %	Low, %	Moderate, %	High, %
Social media dependency	27.13	28	26	5.09	13.3	44.1	42.7
Digital social support	46.41	46	45	9.83	12.1	47.9	40
Loneliness	13.05	13	11	3.25	22	54.7	23.2
Social despair	25.68	26	25	5.21	16.6	52.1	31.3
Social tolerance	25.51	25.50	24	4.56	17.1	47.9	35.1
Social isolation	64.23	64	64	9.65	19.7	47.4	32.9

Source: compiled by Tooba Faraji, Sara Tabatabaei, Bella A. Bulgarova, Papiya Mondal.

The Pearson test results indicate a statistically significant and positive correlation between social isolation and several variables (Table 2). Specifically, social media usage frequency ($r = 0.598$), perceived social support derived from social media ($r = 0.520$), and the degree of dependency on social media ($r = 0.454$) all demonstrate meaningful associations. These findings suggest that excessive engagement with social media – especially when accompanied by a reliance on these platforms for psychological support – may be linked to increased social isolation, reduced psychological resilience, and a diminished capacity to engage with differing viewpoints.

Table 2

Pearson correlation test between social media usage and social isolation, r

Variable	Loneliness	Despair	Social tolerance	Social isolation
Social media usage	0.391	0.556	0.350	0.598
Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Digital social support	0.306	0.421	0.402	0.520
Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001
Social media dependency	0.300	0.349	0.348	0.454
Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Number of responses	422	422	422	422

Source: compiled by Tooba Faraji, Sara Tabatabaei, Bella A. Bulgarova, Papiya Mondal.

Regression Analysis. To elucidate the influence of the independent variables on social isolation within an exploratory framework, a stepwise regression approach was employed. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.497 indicates that approximately 49.7% of the variance in social isolation is explained by the set of predictors – namely,

digital social support, social media dependency, social media usage frequency, and duration of social media membership (Table 3). Notably, social media engagement frequency emerged as the most significant predictor, exerting the strongest direct effect on social isolation.

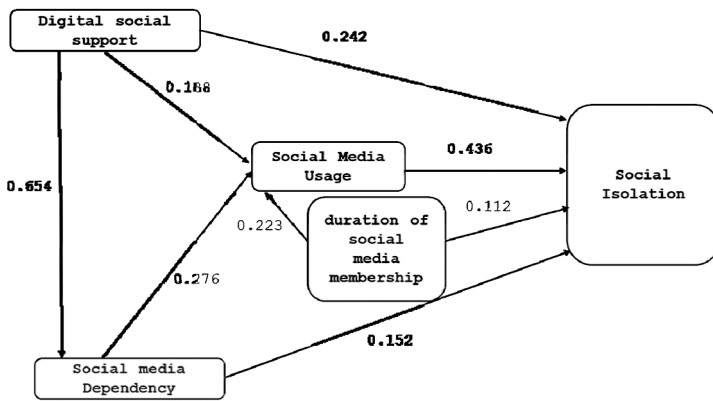
Table 3

Regression coefficients for the predictive models

R Square	ANOVA	Coefficients	Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
0.497	0.000	Constant	35.842		18.613	0.000
		Digital social support	0.238	0.047	0.242	5.104
		Social media dependency	0.289	0.087	0.152	3.313
		Usage	1.588	0.140	0.436	11.318
		Duration	0.650	0.218	0.112	2.977

Source: compiled by Tooba Faraji, Sara Tabatabaei, Bella A. Bulgarova, Papiya Mondal.

Based on the regression model outcomes, social media usage exhibits the most substantial direct effect on social isolation, as indicated by a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.436$. Conversely, the duration of membership demonstrates the least direct influence, with $\beta = 0.112$. Additionally, digital social support exerts the most pronounced indirect effect, evidenced by a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.312$ (Figure).



Research model

Source: created by Tooba Faraji, Sara Tabatabaei, Bella A. Bulgarova, Papiya Mondal.

The present study delineates the relative influence of various predictors on social isolation among digital natives in Delhi, utilizing rigorous regression analysis. Consistent with prior research emphasizing the pivotal role of digital interactions, our findings demonstrate a significant positive correlation between social media usage and social isolation among Delhi’s youth ($r = 0.59$). These results align with previous studies by Sucharitha et al. (2020), Puri and Sharma (2016), Golzar-Khajasteh (2023) and Guo (2018). According to Guo, excessive engagement with virtual spaces – particularly when accompanied by a decline in offline interactions – contributes to heightened feelings of loneliness. Moreover, individuals possessing

underdeveloped social skills and limited familial support are more susceptible to internet addiction and social isolation (Tabatabaei et al., 2024).

Without developed critical thinking skills and developed emotional intelligence, the use of digital social networks and proper consumption of media content seem impossible (Tabatabaei et al., 2024). Young (1998) introduces internet addiction as a factor that transforms individuals into isolated and detached beings, emphasizing that this addiction negatively affects social relationships and individual productivity. Excessive use of the internet leads to reduced efficiency, fewer social interactions, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and low self-confidence (Gazo et al., 2020). This disorder may even cause physical and psychological symptoms, even after discontinuing internet use (Puri, Sharma, 2016). Golzar-Khajasteh (2023) also believes that addictive use of social media leads to identity crises, value disorders, and social isolation. Dreyfus (2008) warns that excessive use of the internet can be dangerous for an individual's mental and physical health and can replace real-life relationships, such as family bonds, leading to further isolation. (Ciacchini et al., 2023) also notes that excessive media use fosters addiction to them, pushing the user to the periphery of social interaction. Ultimately, overuse of virtual spaces can degrade the quality of personal relationships, placing individuals in low-quality communication loops that lead to isolation and transformation in their identity and lifestyle.

Young (1998) believes that depressed individuals, who fear social isolation and have a desperate need for acceptance, turn to the internet to cope with interpersonal relationship problems in the real world.

According to Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), drawing upon Goffman's framework, social media platforms disrupt traditional social norms and values, thereby transforming users' identities and facilitating their integration into new groups and organizations. In their pursuit of external validation, individuals consistently engage with these virtual environments, often at the expense of real-world interactions and familial relationships. This persistent engagement can culminate in social isolation, a phenomenon particularly pronounced among individuals with diminished social skills.

Further findings of this research indicate a significant positive relationship between dependency on social media and social isolation in young Indian users ($r = 0.44$), which aligns with the results of Masoudnia (2019), and Dortaj et al. (2018). According to Dehghan and Kazemi-Aliabad (2019), individuals heavily reliant on social media frequently experience fatigue, depression, and introversion, often attempting to compensate for deficiencies in real-life social interactions through their online engagement.

Dortaj et al. (2018) consider dependency on social media as a result of the immediate attractions of social media, arguing that such dependency leads to increased depression, psychological disorders, and isolation. These users create false identities to escape reality, which results in an identity crisis and further isolation. Young (1998) also states that cyberspace, by imposing specific lifestyles, leads to a decrease in real-world interactions, amplifying feelings of isolation and internet addiction. Masoudnia (2019) and Tabatabaei et al. (2024) point out that

social media-dependent users feel lonelier than others and prefer virtual relationships over family relationships, which contributes to increased social isolation. From Dreyfus (2008) perspective, virtual spaces only allow individuals to present an idealized version of themselves, which leads to increased false self-confidence and reduced social anxiety, gradually pulling them into isolation.

Furthermore, the extent of digital social support and the degree of social isolation among young users in Delhi demonstrate a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.52$), corroborating findings by Tateno et al. (2019) and Morevat and Dehghan (2018). Tateno et al. (2019) argue that social media, by offering emotional and informational support, can exacerbate dependency and social isolation. Similarly, Tabatabaei et al. (2024) highlight the decline of familial emotional support, which fosters reliance on social media and engenders feelings of despair concerning real-world interactions. They reference Wellman, positing that dependence on social media for emotional and informational support diminishes engagement in offline relationships and amplifies social isolation.

Conclusion

The use of social media among young people in Delhi has notable advantages as a tool for communication and gaining social support, but excessive use of these platforms can exacerbate social isolation. Social media, especially for those lacking emotional and social support in the real world, becomes a space for seeking validation and compensating for emotional deficiencies. This leads to a reduction in real social interactions and family relationships. Young people in Delhi, in pursuit of attention and support online, gradually distance themselves from real relationships, and their feelings of loneliness and social isolation intensify.

To counteract the social isolation of social media users, particularly young people in Delhi (ages 18 to 35), it is essential to strike an appropriate balance in social media use. In this regard, it is recommended to develop domestic platforms with culturally and educationally appropriate content for young people so that social media becomes a tool for empowerment and the enhancement of social skills. Furthermore, strengthening communication skills in the real world is of great importance. Organizing educational courses on social skills and face-to-face interactions could encourage young people to participate in real social activities and reduce their dependence on virtual spaces.

Family and social institutions' supervision of young people's online activities, especially with the goal of strengthening real-world social and family relationships, will play an effective role in reducing the negative effects of social isolation. Moreover, teaching time management skills and purposeful use of virtual spaces, especially during adolescence, can help young people make more productive use of the online world while simultaneously strengthening their social relationships in the real world. Ultimately, supporting young people in participating in social and group projects outside the online space can effectively reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen their social belonging.

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