

Research Paper

The Influence of Social Media Engagement on Self-Esteem, Mood and Anxiety: Evidence from Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and GAD-7 Assessments

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has reshaped how individuals communicate and seek validation, but it also links self-worth to engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, creating new vulnerabilities. This study investigates the impact of social media engagement on the mental health of college students in Dehradun, India. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 320 participants aged 18–25 years, using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), along with a self-developed Social Media Post Engagement Index. Results show that higher engagement is positively correlated with self-esteem and positive affect, while lower engagement is associated with increased anxiety and negative affect. Gender differences were evident, with female students reporting stronger emotional responses to post performance. Regression analysis indicated that engagement metrics explained 32% of the variance in self-esteem and 28% in anxiety. These findings highlight how algorithm-driven engagement mechanisms foster cycles of digital validation, contributing to both psychological well-being and distress. The study offers region-specific evidence from India and underscores the importance of promoting digital literacy, raising awareness of algorithmic influence, and designing healthier digital environments to mitigate risks associated with online engagement.

Keywords: *Social Media, Mental Health, Post Engagement, Self-Esteem, Anxiety, College Students, India*

The mental health consequences of online validation are not a recent phenomenon, but their scale and intensity have evolved dramatically with technological advancements. The problem was first subtly noted in the early days of the internet, where researchers observed how people presented themselves in online forums and chat rooms. While these early platforms allowed for the creation of curated identities, the scope was limited to a relatively small community of users. The real shift began with the rise of early social networking sites like MySpace, which introduced the quantifiable display of social connections and popularity. This was the first time an individual's social standing became a

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public, numerical metric, turning the abstract idea of popularity into something that could be directly compared and measured.

The issue escalated significantly with the introduction of "likes," "shares," and other engagement metrics on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. These features gamified social interaction, directly tying the brain's dopamine reward system to digital signals of approval. This created a powerful and often addictive feedback loop, making the pursuit of validation a compulsive activity. What was once a niche phenomenon of self-presentation and comparison has transformed itself into a pervasive public health issue. Today, with the omnipresence of smartphones and highly curated, algorithm-driven feeds on platforms like TikTok, the pressure to maintain a perfect online persona and the constant exposure to idealized lives have intensified. This has led to a widespread increase in anxiety, poor self-esteem, and other mental health challenges, turning a once-subtle side effect of online life into a central concern for youth mental health worldwide.

The widespread use of social media has significantly altered modern social interactions, with platforms serving as primary venues for communication, entertainment, and personal expression. This is particularly true for young adults and college students, who are among the most active users, dedicating a substantial portion of their day to these applications. Within this digital environment, the reception of online content—measured by metrics like likes, shares, and comments—has evolved into a form of social currency.

However, this constant quest for digital validation is contributing to a growing public health concern. The pursuit of social approval through online metrics is linked to increased anxiety and a decline in overall mental well-being. For many, the initial positive feedback from a popular post is a fleeting experience, often followed by psychological distress. This pattern is especially prevalent among those who spend extensive time on social media, often engaging in passive consumption and making unfavorable social comparisons to highly curated online personas. The linkage between digital validation and mental health has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Several studies argue that post performance can significantly influence mood, self-esteem, and anxiety (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Sherman et al., 2018). High engagement is frequently perceived as an affirmation of social belonging and attractiveness, whereas low engagement may evoke feelings of exclusion, rejection, and inferiority (Valkenburg et al., 2017). For young adults undergoing identity development, this validation mechanism becomes especially salient.

In India, the issue is compounded by cultural and social factors. Indian society emphasizes collectivist values, social approval, and reputation within peer networks. Consequently, the psychological impact of digital validation may be more intense than in individualistic cultures. While global studies have explored the link between social media use and mental health, empirical evidence specific to Indian contexts remains scarce. This gap necessitates a localized examination of how post-performance influences college students' psychological well-being.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on an underexplored intersection of digital behavior and mental health in a rapidly digitizing society. By employing standardized psychological instruments alongside a self-developed engagement index, the study seeks to provide robust empirical evidence on the relationship between social media post-performance and mental health.

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Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the relationship between post-performance (likes, comments, shares) and self-esteem among college students.
2. To analyze the association between post-performance and anxiety levels.
3. To investigate the moderating role of gender in shaping psychological responses to post engagement.

Research Questions:

1. Does higher post-performance correlate with increased self-esteem and positive mood?
2. Does lower post-performance correlate with heightened anxiety and negative effect?
3. Are there gender-based differences in the psychological impact of post engagement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations of this study can be situated within established psychological and communication theories that explain why social media engagement affects the mental health of college students. Social Comparison Theory, originally proposed by Festinger (1954), suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes, achievements, and experiences with those of others. In the social media environment, this process is amplified by the constant visibility of peers' activities and the quantification of popularity through likes, comments, and shares. Post engagement metrics thus serve as a tangible benchmark against which individuals measure their self-worth. For students in Dehradun, these metrics provide both opportunities for affirmation and risks of negative self-comparison. High engagement may bolster self-esteem by positioning the student favorably within their peer group, whereas low engagement can trigger feelings of inadequacy and heightened anxiety, reinforcing the link between digital validation and psychological wellbeing explored in this study.

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), offers another useful framework. It posits that human wellbeing depends on the satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Social media, through its interactive features, provides avenues for fulfilling each of these needs. The act of posting content reflects autonomy, engagement in the form of likes and comments validates competence, and online interactions foster a sense of relatedness to peers. However, when engagement does not meet expectations, these needs are thwarted. A lack of validation undermines feelings of competence, while limited interaction threatens relatedness, ultimately producing distress and anxiety. In the context of this study, the fluctuating satisfaction and frustration of these needs help explain the observed relationship between post-performance and student mental health outcomes.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) further illuminate the motivation behind social media engagement. Students use these platforms not passively but actively, seeking entertainment, information, and social connection. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares function as gratification mechanisms that reinforce these behaviors. When students receive high engagement, they experience enjoyment and validation, which motivate continued use. However, this cycle of gratification can also foster dependency, as the constant pursuit of validation makes individuals increasingly sensitive to fluctuations in engagement. In the case of Dehradun students, the findings of this study

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reflect this dynamic: engagement not only provides short-term psychological benefits but also shapes longer-term patterns of self-esteem and anxiety, demonstrating how gratification can evolve into dependency.

Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for interpreting the study's results. Social Comparison Theory explains the evaluative pressures of visible engagement; Self-Determination Theory clarifies how unmet psychological needs generate distress and Uses and Gratifications Theory highlights the motivations and reinforcements that sustain engagement behaviors. By integrating these perspectives, the current study situates post-performance as more than a superficial feature of social media—it becomes a central mechanism through which students negotiate identity, belonging, and wellbeing. This theoretical grounding underscores the significance of examining engagement metrics not just as digital traces of activity, but as psychological cues with real consequences for young people navigating the pressures of academic and social life in Dehradun.

2. Studies on Social Media and Mental Health

The growing body of literature on social media and youth mental health underscores the urgency of understanding the psychosocial consequences of digital technologies. The American Psychiatric Association's edited volume (Harrison, Collier, & Adelsheim, 2025) stands out as an authoritative contribution, weaving together clinical insights, empirical research, and policy perspectives. Its greatest strength lies in synthesizing psychiatric evidence into actionable recommendations, particularly tailored interventions for adolescents who are disproportionately exposed to risks such as cyberbullying, compulsive use, and harmful social comparison. Adding to this, Taylor's (2023) doctoral dissertation employs a multi-method design to explore how mental health-related content on social media affects vulnerable adolescents. The study highlights the dual role of digital platforms, where supportive content can foster belonging while maladaptive narratives, such as the normalization of self-harm, amplify psychological risks. The Royal College of Psychiatrists' volume (House & Brennan, 2023) echoes these findings but shifts the emphasis to systemic responses, offering a UK-centric perspective on healthcare and policy interventions.

A different angle emerges in Scheinbaum's (2024) *The Darker Side of Social Media*, which situates psychological outcomes within consumer psychology, pointing to the manipulative effects of persuasive design, algorithmic amplification, and identity performance. In contrast, Durlinsky (2020) adopts a practitioner's voice, focusing on individual-level strategies such as mindfulness, boundary-setting, and digital detox as methods to mitigate social media stress. Policy dimensions are further explored by de León (2024), whose dissertation on California's AB-1282 legislation critically examines how regulatory frameworks can manage the mental health risks of digital platforms. This analysis reveals the tensions between personal responsibility, corporate accountability, and state intervention, placing mental health within a wider welfare policy context. Taking together, these contributions highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the discourse, spanning psychiatry, communication, consumer psychology, and law. While there is broad consensus that problematic social media use is linked to adverse outcomes, the literature diverges in its priorities—ranging from clinical management (APA, RCPsych) to psychological and cultural perspectives (Scheinbaum, Durlinsky) and regulatory frameworks (de León). A unifying theme is the call for layered context-sensitive strategies that integrate youth empowerment, clinical support, and systemic regulation.

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The dual effects of social media engagement are further evidenced in empirical research. Sherman et al. (2018) found that adolescents exhibited heightened neural activity in the brain's reward centers when their posts received more likes, confirming the reinforcing effect of digital validation. Similarly, Valkenburg et al. (2017) demonstrated that higher engagement levels correlated positively with social self-esteem, while Twenge and Campbell (2018) reported the opposite—where increased screen time combined with low engagement predicted declines in psychological well-being and increased depressive symptoms. Marwick (2019) points to the unpredictability created by algorithmic systems, where visibility and engagement often lie outside users' control, fostering anxiety. Studies conducted in Western contexts broadly converge on the conclusion that post performance is a double-edged sword: high engagement tends to elevate mood and self-worth, whereas low engagement undermines confidence and increases vulnerability, as Fardouly et al. (2015) emphasize.

In India, scholarship on social media and mental health is still at an emerging stage, yet it provides valuable cultural insights. Sharma and Sharma (2021) observed heightened social anxiety among Indian college students, particularly linked to fear of missing out on Instagram. Singh and Bhatia (2022) highlighted the importance of digital peer validation in shaping adolescent self-concept, noting that Indian students often attach greater emotional weight to likes and comments than their Western counterparts. This difference may be attributed to the cultural salience of collective identity and peer approval, which intensifies the psychological consequences of digital validation in the Indian context.

Gendered experiences also surface strongly in literature. Fardouly et al. (2015) demonstrated that young women are particularly susceptible to body image concerns when exposed to peers' high-engagement content. Indian evidence echoes these findings. Khurana and Tiwari (2020) found that female college students reported more pronounced mood fluctuations based on the visibility and reception of their posts. These disparities can be linked to prevailing social norms, where female appearance and peer approval are emphasized more heavily, thereby amplifying the psychological toll of online validation pressures.

Despite the breadth of global research, significant gaps remain in the Indian context, particularly concerning the direct relationship between post-performance and psychological outcomes. Few studies integrate standardized psychological measures with quantitative engagement metrics, leaving a gap in the empirical grounding of such relationships. This study seeks to address this deficiency by focusing on college students in Dehradun, offering region-specific evidence that bridges cultural, psychological, and digital dimensions of mental health.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

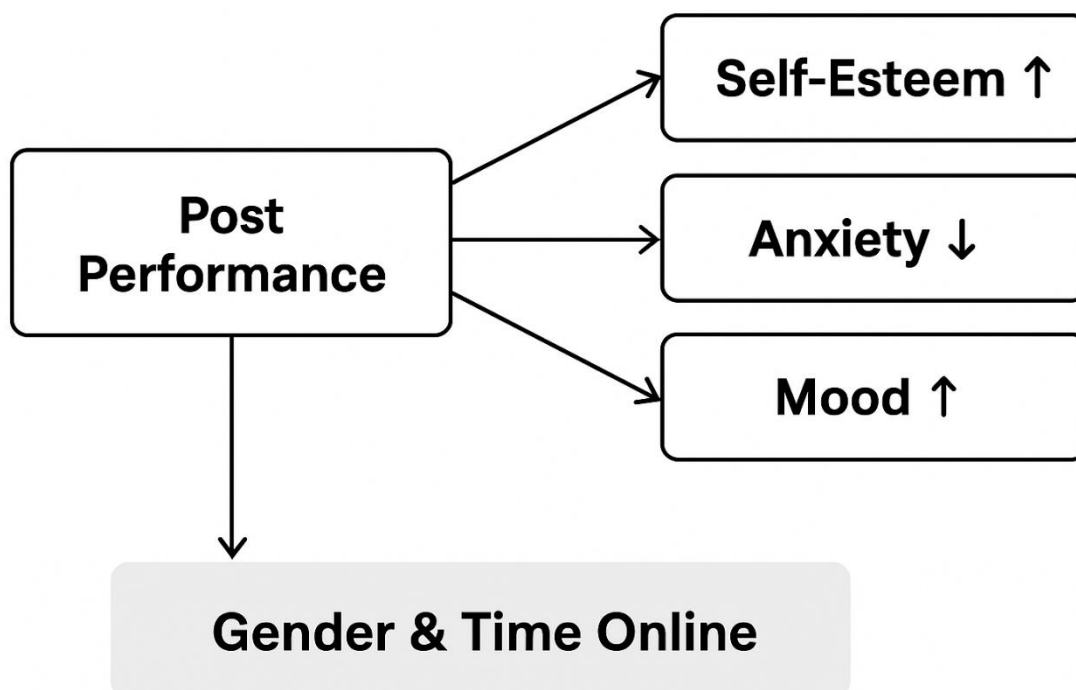
The conceptual framework (Figure 1) developed for this study illustrates the hypothesized relationships between social media post-performance and the mental health outcomes of college students in Dehradun. At its core, the model positions post-performance—operationalized through measurable indicators such as the number of likes, comments, and shares—as the independent variable. These engagement metrics are not merely superficial measures of online activity; rather, they function as visible indicators of peer recognition and digital validation. In the context of youth, whose sense of identity and belonging is often shaped by social interactions, these metrics become powerful signals that influence self-perceptions and emotional states.

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The framework identifies three dependent variables—self-esteem, anxiety, and mood (including both positive and negative effect) as outcomes shaped by fluctuations in post-performance. When students receive high engagement on their posts, they are likely to experience a boost in self-esteem and more frequent positive effects, reflecting the reinforcing nature of digital validation. Conversely, when engagement is low, the same students may feel rejected or overlooked, which contributes to increased anxiety and negative effects. These pathways demonstrate the dual-edged influence of social media engagement: it has the potential to elevate psychological wellbeing in moments of affirmation but also to undermine confidence and increase distress when validation is absent. Moderating these relationships are gender and the amount of time students spend on social media. Gender is a particularly important factor because existing research suggests that female students are more emotionally sensitive to fluctuations in online validation, partly due to societal pressures related to appearance and peer approval. This heightened sensitivity means that the relationship between post-performance and anxiety, for example, may be stronger among female students than among their male counterparts. Time spent on social media also plays a moderating role, as students who spend more hours online are more deeply embedded in cycles of posting, monitoring, and evaluating engagement. For such students, the psychological impact of post-performance is likely to be more pronounced, as the stakes of digital validation are heightened by greater exposure and investment.

Taken together, this conceptual framework provides a structured way of understanding how post-performance operates as a critical determinant of student mental health. It emphasizes that the effects of social media are not uniform but contingent upon both individual and contextual factors. By mapping these relationships, the framework not only guides the empirical testing undertaken in this study but also underscores the importance of considering the interplay between digital behaviors, psychological outcomes, and moderating influences in assessing the broader impact of social media on youth wellbeing.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Impact of Post Performance on Mental Health



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between social media post-performance and mental health outcomes among college students in Dehradun. A structured questionnaire was distributed online, allowing systematic data collection on post-engagement metrics alongside validated psychological indicators. The design was chosen for its ability to capture a snapshot of student experiences at a given point in time, enabling the identification of associations between digital validation and psychological wellbeing.

The target population consisted of college students aged 18 to 25 years in Dehradun, Uttarakhand. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across five different colleges in the region. Out of 350 questionnaires distributed, 320 valid responses were obtained, yielding a strong response rate of 91 percent. The demographic profile of participants showed a balanced gender representation with 52 percent female and 48 percent male students, a mean age of 20.4 years, and a majority (68 percent) enrolled in undergraduate programs, while 32 percent were postgraduate students. On average, participants reported spending 3.5 hours per day on social media, reflecting high levels of digital engagement typical for this age group.

To measure the key variables, a set of standardized and reliable instruments was employed. Social media post-performance was quantified using the Social Media Post Engagement Index (SMPEI), developed for this study to track average likes, comments, and shares across the most recent five posts, with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a widely validated 10-item instrument with reliability of $\alpha = 0.88$. Anxiety levels were measured with the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), which demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$). Finally, mood states were captured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), a 20-item instrument with reliability of $\alpha = 0.87$.

Data collection was conducted during March and April 2025 through online surveys disseminated via institutional mailing lists. The process was guided by ethical standards, with prior approval obtained from the Institutional Review Board. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that clarified the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature, while assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were given to protect their privacy. This ethical framework ensured that participants' rights and wellbeing were safeguarded throughout the research process.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions of key variables. Pearson's correlation analysis was applied to examine the associations between post-engagement metrics and psychological outcomes. Multiple regression models were conducted to test hypotheses regarding the predictive value of social media engagement on self-esteem, anxiety, and mood states. Moderation analysis was also performed, introducing gender as an interaction term to explore whether the strength or direction of these relationships varied between male and female students. This comprehensive approach provided both descriptive and inferential insights into the complex dynamics of social media engagement and mental health.

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Findings

The descriptive statistics reveal that on average, students reported around 120 likes, 15 comments, and 6 shares on their social media posts. Their daily usage of social media platforms averaged 3.5 hours, reflecting a high level of engagement. Psychological measures indicated that students had a moderate mean self-esteem score of 26.8, while their mean anxiety score stood at 8.5, falling within the mild range. These baseline figures provide important context for interpreting the subsequent analyses, highlighting a student population that is both highly active online and moderately affected in terms of psychological wellbeing.

The correlation analysis shows significant relationships between post engagement and mental health outcomes. Higher engagement was positively associated with self-esteem ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$) and positive affect ($r = 0.39, p < 0.01$), while it was negatively associated with anxiety ($r = -0.35, p < 0.01$). This suggests that students who receive greater digital validation through likes, comments, and shares tend to experience better self-perceptions and reduced anxiety. Regression analysis further strengthens these findings by showing that post engagement is a significant predictor of both self-esteem ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.32$) and anxiety ($\beta = -0.37, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.28$), accounting for a meaningful proportion of the variance in both psychological measures. Gender differences add another layer of insight, with female students reporting stronger emotional responses to their post-performance. The effect of engagement on anxiety was more pronounced among females ($\beta = -0.45$) compared to males ($\beta = -0.28$), suggesting that young women may be especially vulnerable to the psychological consequences of fluctuating online validation.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm that social media post-performance significantly influences mental health outcomes among Indian college students. High-performing posts boosted self-esteem and positive mood, consistent with findings by Sherman et al. (2018) and Valkenburg et al. (2017). Low-performing posts increased anxiety and negative affect, echoing Twenge and Campbell's (2018) work on digital well-being.

The gender differences observed align with Fardouly et al. (2015), suggesting that female users experience stronger psychological responses to post performance due to societal expectations and heightened body image concerns. In the Indian context, collectivist cultural values may exacerbate these effects, as social approval plays a central role in shaping identity.

The findings also extend Social Comparison Theory by illustrating how algorithm-driven visibility intensifies comparisons. The unpredictability of engagement metrics—partially determined by opaque algorithms—introduces uncertainty that can heighten anxiety, supporting Marwick's (2019) argument on algorithmic selfhood.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes a clear link between social media post-performance and the mental health outcomes of college students in Dehradun. It finds that higher levels of engagement with posts are associated with elevated self-esteem and positive emotional states, while lower engagement leads to heightened anxiety and negative psychological effects. Gender emerges as an important moderating factor, with female students showing greater vulnerability to the psychological consequences of online validation. By integrating

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engagement metrics with standardized psychological measures, the study not only fills a regional gap in empirical evidence from India but also highlights cultural and gender-specific nuances in the dynamics of digital validation.

At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation, and the reliance on self-reported engagement may introduce response bias. Furthermore, as the findings are based solely on Dehradun students, they may not be generalizable to other regions in India. These constraints point to future research opportunities, including longitudinal studies to assess long-term impacts, experimental approaches to test causal relationships, and comparative studies across rural and urban populations, as well as international contexts. Despite these limitations, the research offers practical implications: universities can design digital literacy programs to sensitize students about the psychological consequences of social media use; policymakers can frame guidelines for healthier digital practices; and social media platforms can consider greater algorithmic transparency and interventions such as removing public like counts to ease validation pressures.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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