

Research Paper

Social Networking Sites and the Indian Youth: A Content Analysis of User Motivation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the diverse motivations driving Indian youth to engage with Social Networking Sites (SNS) by applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U>). A qualitative content analysis of responses from 70 participants aged 18–29 revealed twelve key motivational domains: communication, entertainment, maintaining existing relationships, meeting new people, passing time, transfer of media, career-related activities, information and education, love and/or sexual experiences, self-expression, shopping, and photo/video capturing or editing. While several domains, such as communication and entertainment, mirror established literature, others—like transfer of media and photo/video editing; emerged as distinctive to this cohort. Findings underscore SNS as multifunctional tools serving social, informational, expressive, and professional needs, but also highlight potential risks, including excessive passive use, FoMO, and appearance pressures. Results affirm the relevance of U> while suggesting the need for expanded frameworks to account for contemporary, platform-specific behaviors. The study provides a culturally contextualized understanding of SNS engagement in India, offering implications for educators, policymakers, and platform designers to foster digital well-being and critical media literacy among youth.

Keywords: *Social Networking Sites, Indian Youth, Motivation, Internet Usage*

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become deeply embedded in the social and psychological fabric of modern youth culture. **Social Networking Sites (SNS)** are defined as “Virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests with the main objective being to connect people” (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Prominent examples include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, X, and more recently, Tinder and Bumble, each offering users distinct functionalities for social interaction, self-presentation, and community-building.

The proliferation of SNS has been unprecedented. According to Petrosyan (2024), over 5.3 billion people globally use the internet, with nearly 4.9 billion active on social media—an increase of more than 10% in just the past year. In India, the rise has been especially exponential. As per Basuroy (2024), India boasts over 467 million active social media users,

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a figure expected to rise substantially due to the increasing affordability of smartphones and internet access. Platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram have become indispensable tools of communication among Indian youth, with WhatsApp being used by over 98% of internet users in the country.

This remarkable penetration of SNS has raised critical questions about what drives such intense usage, especially among adolescents and young adults. Research suggests that SNS usage is not merely habitual or recreational but reflects complex psychological and social needs (Campisi et al., 2015; Al-Menayes, 2015). Some studies associate high SNS usage with personal gratification, self-expression, romantic pursuits, and stress reduction (Jarman et al., 2021; Couch et al., 2012), while others draw attention to its link with adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety, social comparison, and even addiction (Block, 2008; Young, 2017; Dhir et al., 2016).

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U>)

To understand the motivational underpinnings of social media use, researchers have frequently relied on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U>). Initially proposed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) and further developed by Rubin (1993), U> posits that individuals actively seek out media platforms to fulfil specific cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs. In contrast to earlier theories that viewed audiences as passive consumers, UGT conceptualizes users as active agents who selectively engage with media based on their unique psychological motivations and social contexts. Motivation serves as the underlying driver for the uses and gratifications theory. Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and sustains goal-oriented behaviour. It is the driving force behind actions, influencing how people approach tasks and activities to fulfil their needs and desires (Maslow, 1943). U> has four major assumptions:

1. Media use is goal-directed or motivated
2. People use media to satisfy their needs and desires
3. Social and psychological factors mediate media use
4. Media use and interpersonal communication are related

In the digital age, the scope of U> has expanded considerably. Scholars like Sundar and Limperos (2013) and Whiting and Williams (2013) have proposed "U> 2.0," which accommodates the interactive, participatory, and immersive characteristics of social media. New gratifications such as self-promotion, virtual community belonging, and fear of missing out (FoMO) have gained prominence, especially among youth (Przybylski et al., 2013; Dumas et al., 2016). In the Indian context, Roy (2009) and Menon and Meghana (2021) have shown how youth use SNS not only to gratify traditional needs but also to navigate shifting cultural values, professional aspirations, and peer validation in an increasingly digitalized society.

Contemporary studies applying UGT to SNS identify several dominant motivations: entertainment, information seeking, social interaction, passing time, self-presentation, and status seeking (Joinson, 2008; Al-Menayes, 2015; Luchman et al., 2014). For example, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) found that Facebook use among college students was primarily driven by the dual needs for belongingness and self-presentation. Similarly, Barker (2009) highlighted peer connectivity and identity formation as central motivations among adolescents using MySpace. These findings align with the broader psychological consensus that digital behavior is not random or passive but deeply tied to psychosocial needs.

SNS usage in India, is influenced by distinct cultural, economic, and technological factors. Gupta and Bashir (2018), in their validation of a Social Networking Usage Questionnaire for Indian students, found entertainment and social interaction as the most common motives. Roy (2009) emphasized the growing tendency of Indian youth to use the internet for personal gratification rather than academic or informational purposes. Other studies by Rajani (2016) and Mude and Undale (2023) support the idea that Indian youth perceive SNS as vital social tools rather than knowledge platforms, using them for peer interaction, trend-following, and digital visibility.

Media Practice Model

(Steele & Brown, 1995) offers another valuable lens, suggesting that media choices among adolescents are shaped by identity development and everyday life contexts. This model underscores how SNS are not just consumed but integrated into the daily habits of youth, influencing how they express and perceive themselves. For instance, platforms like Instagram allow for visual storytelling, while X supports discursive identity construction.

Social Comparison Theory

Another critical aspect is the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals determine their own social and personal worth by comparing themselves to others. In the realm of SNS, this often translates into curated self-presentation and the pursuit of online validation. Vogel et al. (2014) found that frequent exposure to idealized online images increases upward comparisons, leading to reduced self-esteem and greater depressive symptoms.

Closely related is the emerging psychological construct of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out), which Przybylski et al. (2013) identified as a significant driver of excessive SNS usage. Indian youth, often juggling academic pressure, career uncertainty, and limited recreational outlets, may experience heightened FoMO, compelling them to maintain constant connectivity through WhatsApp groups, Instagram Stories, and Snapchat streaks. Dhir et al. (2018) further confirmed that FoMO, digital fatigue, and compulsive use were interlinked in Indian university students.

Importantly, the affordances of SNS platforms have evolved dramatically in recent years. New features such as live streams, disappearing messages, algorithmic timelines, and AI filters have changed the nature of engagement. These platform-specific affordances mean that motivations can vary not just by user but by application—a nuance that many earlier studies overlook.

The Indian media landscape further complicates this picture. The country's linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity affects access and preferences in SNS usage. For instance, career-related use (e.g., job search, networking on LinkedIn or X), self-expression (via Instagram Reels, Pinterest boards, or YouTube), and media transfer utilities (e.g., WhatsApp document sharing, Telegram channels) have become routine parts of young users' digital behavior. These motives often go unaccounted for in older UGT frameworks, yet are crucial in understanding modern-day gratifications.

While existing literature has explored motivations behind SNS use globally, there remains a dearth of qualitative, in-depth research focusing specifically on Indian youth. Given the psychosocial implications of SNS use—ranging from mental health to identity development—it is imperative to investigate what drives Indian youth to invest time and

emotion in these platforms. This study fills that gap through a qualitative content analysis of Indian youth, aiming to decode the multilayered motivations behind SNS usage. By understanding these motivations, educators, mental health professionals, and policy-makers can design more informed interventions to promote digital well-being and critical digital literacy among India's rapidly growing online youth population.

It aims to go beyond traditional gratifications by integrating newly emerging motives and platform-specific behaviors.

Objectives

- To explore the key psychological, social, and/or emotional motivations that drive Indian youth to engage with SNS.
- To identify and categorize recurring motivational themes from qualitative data collected through open ended questionnaires.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory research design to investigate the various psychological, social, and emotional motivators of SNS usage among young adults in India.

Sample

A total of 70 individuals (18-29 years of age) who are either studying or working or both and currently residing in India have participated in this study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data. This sample size was considered appropriate for a qualitative content analysis study, consistent with recommendations that samples of 60–100 participants are sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006).

a. Inclusion Criteria:

- Individuals residing in India
- Individuals between the age group of 18 to 29 years
- Individuals who are active on three or more of the following applications (for a minimum of one month period) – Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, X, Telegram, LinkedIn, Tinder, Bumble, Hinge. These ten platforms were selected to represent the breadth of SNS categories prevalent among Indian youth: general social networking (Facebook, Instagram), instant messaging (WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat), professional networking (LinkedIn), microblogging (X), and mobile dating applications (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge).

b. Exclusion Criteria:

- Married individuals
- Anyone who has resided/is temporarily abroad for studies

Tools used

An open-ended questionnaire was developed to identify the motivation behind SNS usage. The questionnaire was designed to gather qualitative data on the individuals' reasons and preferences for using SNS. The open-ended format allowed participants to elaborate on why they use certain applications, in their own words, providing in-depth insights. Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, traditional psychometric reliability and validity indices (e.g., Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis) were not applicable. Instead,

content validity was established through expert review: the questionnaire items were reviewed by three subject-matter experts in psychology and media research who assessed their relevance and coverage of SNS motivational domains. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback prior to final administration. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with five participants to assess clarity and comprehensibility, and the instrument was finalized following their feedback.

Procedure

Data collection took place over a period of three months. The questionnaire was distributed to eligible individuals at various institutions across different states of the country through online platforms and in-person interactions after establishing rapport. Prior to distribution, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure they understood the purpose of the study and their right to confidentiality. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire independently and were encouraged to answer openly and honestly.

Analysis

The data collected through the open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using a combination of content analysis and descriptive statistics. Specifically, conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was employed. This inductive approach involved multiple readings of participant responses to identify patterns, followed by open coding wherein meaningful units of text were labeled. Related codes were subsequently grouped into categories, and categories were consolidated into overarching motivational domains through constant comparative analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to the demographic data, with a particular focus on age and gender distribution. The mean and standard deviation of participants' ages and frequency distribution for gender were calculated to provide a clear overview of the sample's demographic characteristics.

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Participant Age

Statistic	Age
Valid data	70
Mean	23.564
Std. Deviation	2.690
Minimum	18.000
Maximum	29.000

The descriptive statistics for participants' age are summarized in Table 1. The mean age of participants was 23.564 years (SD = 2.69), with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years.

Table 2 Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	39	55.71
Male	31	44.29
Total	70	100.00

The gender distribution of participants is presented in Table 2. As shown, out of the total 70 participants, 39 (55.71%) identified as female, while 31 (44.29%) identified as male.

The content analysis of the survey responses revealed several motivations of Indian youth to use SNS daily. These motivations are categorized into twelve broad domains:

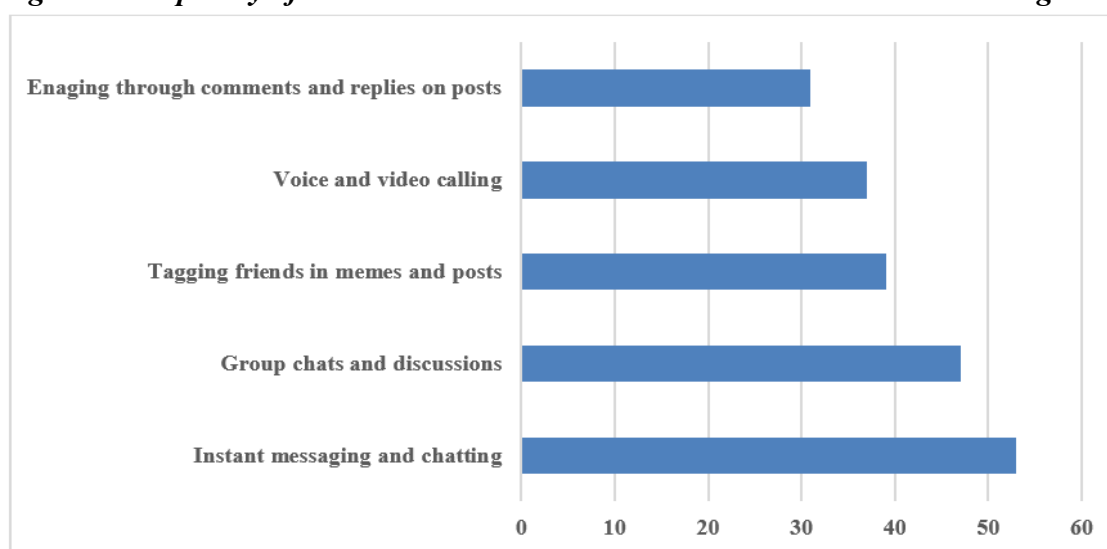
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Communication, Entertainment, Maintaining Existing Relationships, Meeting New People, Passing Time, Transfer of Media, Career related activities, Information and education related activities, Love and/or sexual experience, self-expression, shopping, and Photo/video capturing and/or editing. The domains are explained briefly and the frequency of responses given by the individuals under the domain are highlighted in the bar diagrams below.

Communication

The communication category includes the extent to which the individual uses SNS primarily for direct and immediate communication with others.

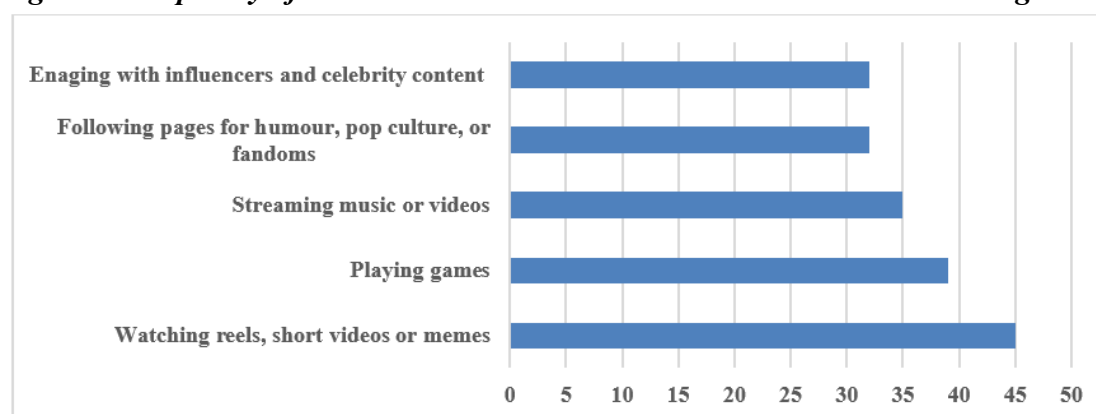
Figure 1 Frequency of Communication-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Entertainment

Entertainment was a common use for amusement, leisure and seeking to be entertained by content and interactions, as reported by the individuals.

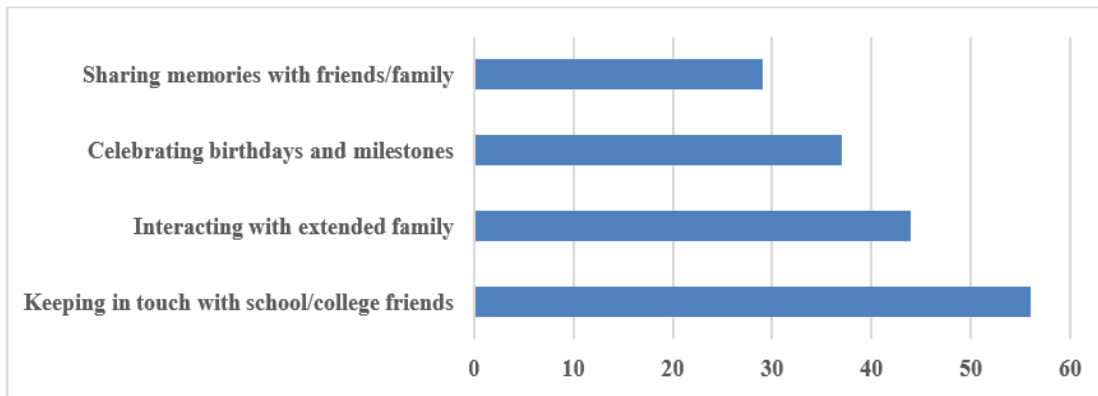
Figure 2 Frequency of Entertainment-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Maintaining existing relationships

This domain highlights the extent to which individuals employ SNS to nurture and sustain preexisting social connections.

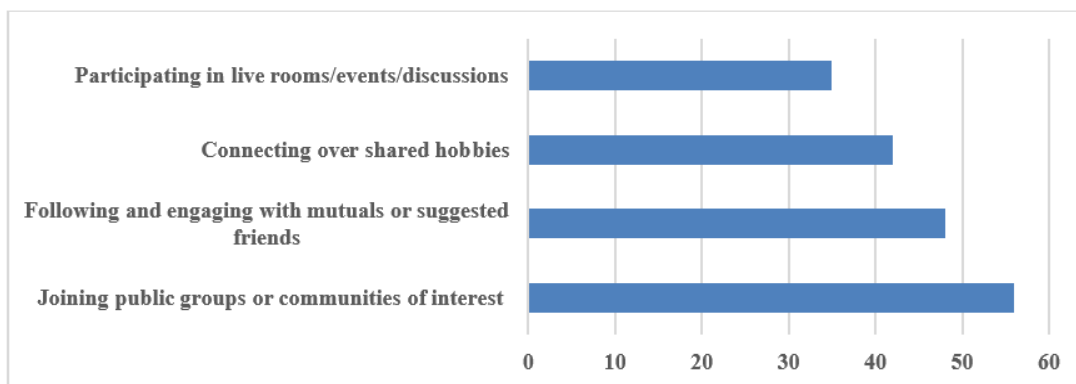
Figure 3 Frequency of Activities Related to Maintaining Existing Relationships on Social Networking Sites



Meeting new people

The domain emphasizes the degree to which the individuals utilize SNS to expand their social circle.

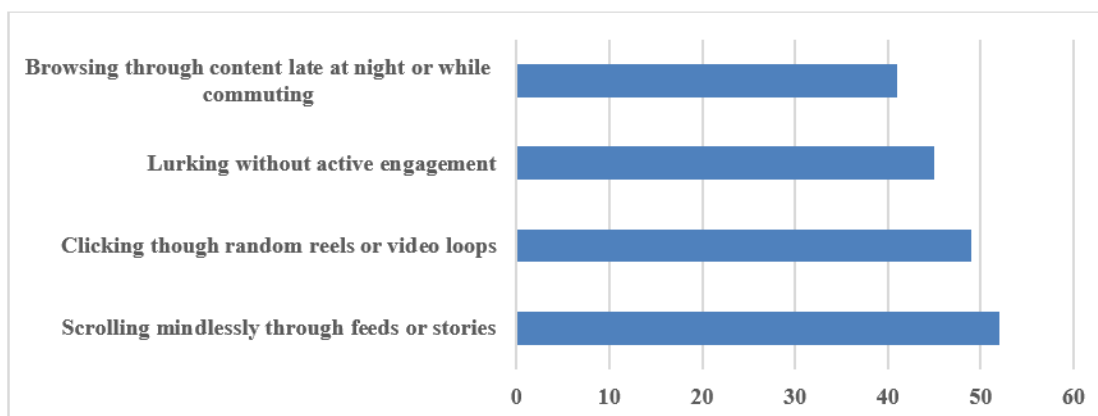
Figure 4 Frequency of Activities Related to Meeting New People on Social Networking Sites



Passing time

The category of passing time related to the extent the individuals used SNS to fill idle time, out of habit or to avoid boredom.

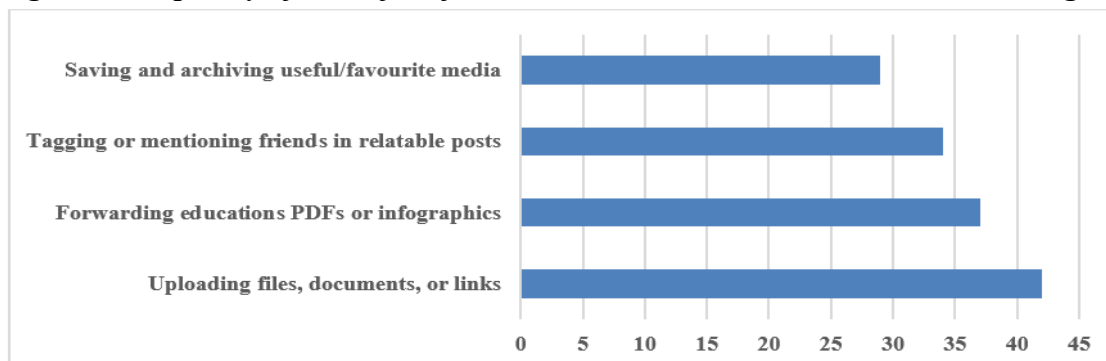
Figure 5 Frequency of Activities Related to Passing Time on Social Networking Sites



Transfer of media

Transfer of media relates to the use of SNS to share exchange, or store photos, videos, or other digital content.

Figure 6 Frequency of Transfer of Media-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Career related activities

Career related activities refer to the individuals using SNS for professional purposes, including networking, job searching, internships and building a professional brand.

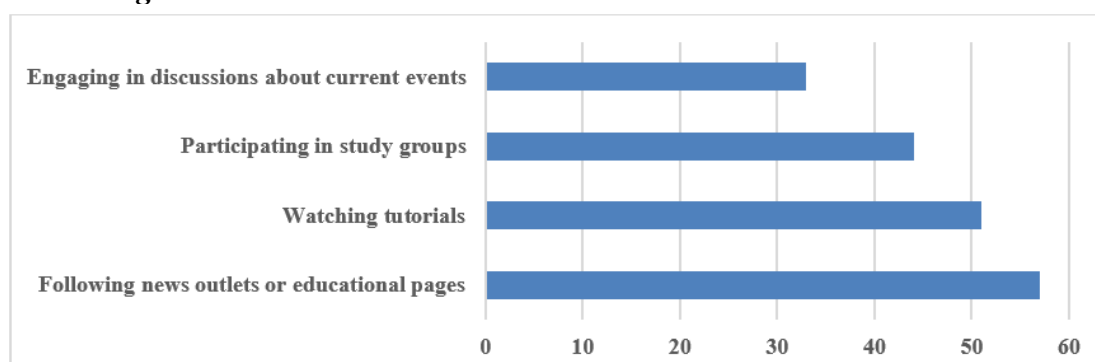
Figure 7 Frequency of Career-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Information and education related activities

Information and education related activities refer to the individuals using SNS to access information and engage in academic activities.

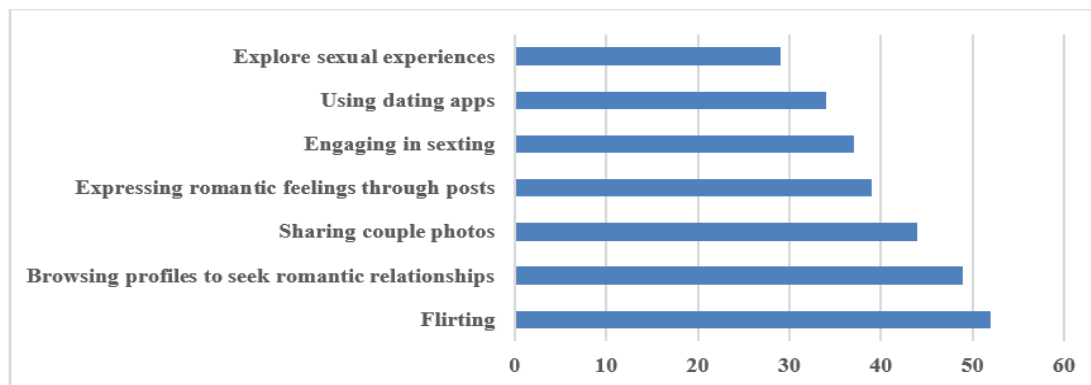
Figure 8 Frequency of Information and education-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Love and/or sexual experience

This domain includes individuals using SNS to seek romantic or sexual relationships, engage in online dating or explore sexual experiences.

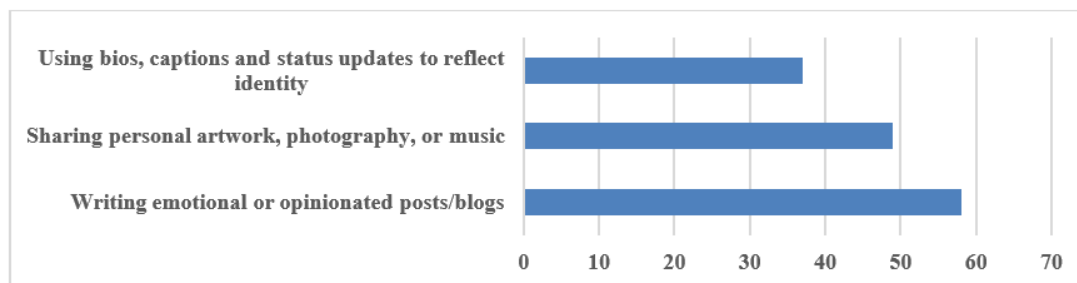
Figure 9 Frequency of Love and/or sexual experience-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Self-expression

Self-expression includes the degree to which the individuals utilize SNS to express their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and personality.

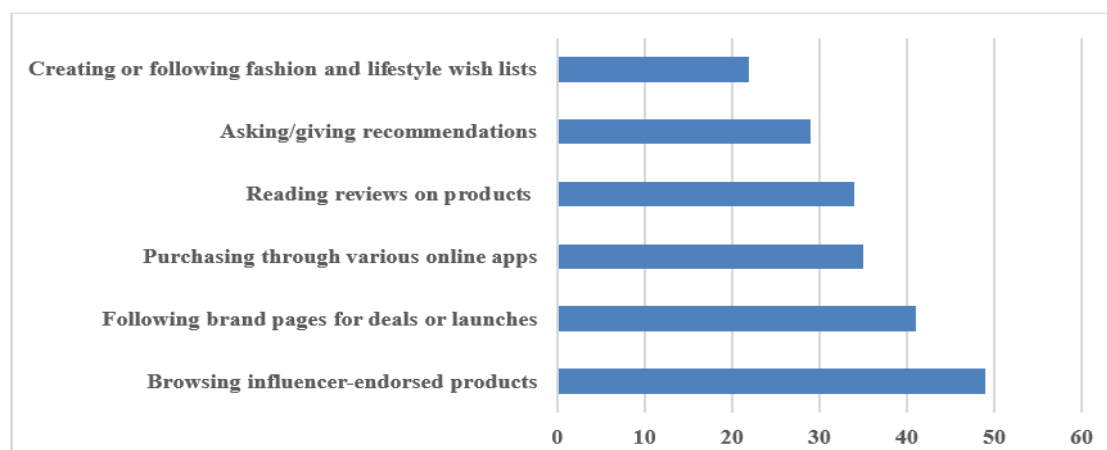
Figure 10 Frequency of Self-expression-Related Activities on Social Networking Sites



Shopping

Shopping refers to the degree individuals use SNS to explore, compare, and purchase products or services.

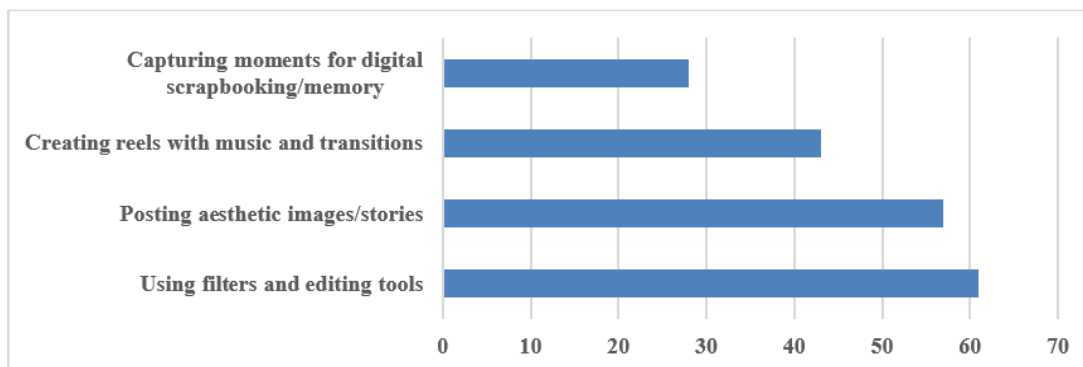
Figure 11 Frequency of Activities Related to Shopping on Social Networking Sites



Photo/video capturing and/or editing

This domain includes the individual's inclination to use SNS for their integrated tools to capture, edit and enhance visual content before sharing.

Figure 12 *Frequency of Activities Related to Photo/video capturing and/or editing on Social Networking Sites*



DISCUSSION

This study examined the varied motivations of Indian youth for using SNS, categorizing their online activities into twelve major domains: communication, entertainment, maintaining existing relationships, meeting new people, passing time, transfer of media, career-related activities, information and education-related activities, love and/or sexual experiences, self-expression, shopping, and photo/video capturing or editing. The analysis drew on frequency counts of self-reported activities, revealing both functional and leisure-oriented uses. Many of these domains—such as communication, entertainment, and relationship maintenance—have been consistently identified in earlier studies across different cultural contexts (Al-Menayes, 2015; Ellison et al., 2007; Kircaburun et al., 2020), while others—such as transfer of media and photo/video capturing—emerged more prominently in this study, possibly reflecting evolving platform features and youth-centered digital trends in India. Findings also suggest that SNS are deeply embedded in the daily routines of young people, serving as tools for social interaction, personal development, professional networking, and creative expression.

Communication

The high frequencies for immediate interpersonal features (instant messaging, group chats, voice/video calling) show that synchronous and semi-synchronous communication remains central for Indian youth. Instant messaging as the top reported subfunction (53) aligns with the way WhatsApp and similar apps have become everyday communication infrastructures in India (Gupta & Bashir, 2018; Basuroy, 2024). Group chats and tagging indicate not only dyadic exchange but also collective coordination and social identity work (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Voice and video use (37) reflects a preference for richer media when available—echoing media-richness ideas that people choose richer channels for more personal exchanges. Heavy reliance on instant channels increases social availability, real-time obligations (e.g., expectation to respond), and potential for digital stress/fatigue (Gupta & Bashir, 2018; Ellison et al., 2007; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Entertainment

Entertainment is a dominant gratification (45 mentions for reels/memes). The popularity of short-form, algorithmically fed content is consistent with global and Indian trends showing

that bite-sized videos and meme culture are major engagement drivers (Al-Menayes, 2015; Mude & Undale, 2023). Games and streaming also remain important, indicating multi-modal leisure patterns. Influencer content's equal frequency (32) suggests that aspirational and parasocial forms of entertainment are highly salient. Entertainment uses can increase screen time and contribute to habitual use (Dhir et al., 2016). However, entertainment can also foster creativity and community. Platforms and parents should balance benefits (learning, relaxation) with risks (displacement of sleep, attention) (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Al-Menayes, 2015; Dhir et al., 2016).

Maintaining Existing Relationships

That keeping in touch scored the single highest frequency (56) underscores SNS' role as social glue. For Indian youth, the family and community orientation often makes SNS use a tool for intergenerational connection (Roy, 2009; Ellison et al., 2007). Celebrating milestones and sharing memories are ritualized practices that maintain relational bonds. SNS help maintain social capital and bonding ties, which can be protective for wellbeing, but they can also intensify obligations. Interventions could leverage SNS for positive social support, while promoting healthy boundary setting (Ellison et al., 2007; Roy, 2009).

Meeting New People

Joining public groups was the most frequent item (57), suggesting that youth actively use SNS to expand networks and find niche communities. This supports findings that social media extends social horizons beyond physical neighbourhoods, enabling interest-based affiliation (Java et al., 2007; Luchman et al., 2014). Live rooms and events further show how synchronous, low-barrier interaction can lead to new connections. Moderation, digital literacy, and safe community norms are key (Java et al., 2007; Luchman et al., 2014).

Passing Time

High frequencies for passive usage behaviours indicate that SNS are widely used as habitual time fillers (Ruggiero, 2000; Rubin, 1993). Mindless scrolling (52) and late-night use (41) point to possible sleep-displacing behaviours and attentional fragmentation. Lurking—high at 45—reflects passive consumption that still shapes attitudes via social comparison. Habitual use is linked to FoMO and poor sleep hygiene (Przybylski et al., 2013; Dhir et al., 2016).

Transfer of Media

The use of SNS for practical exchange—sharing documents, educational materials, and links—shows that young people treat messaging platforms as multipurpose productivity tools (Gupta et al., 2018). Especially in academic contexts, file transfer over WhatsApp/Telegram is common and efficient. This functional use suggests opportunities to harness SNS for collaborative learning but also introduces privacy and intellectual property considerations. Institutions may need guidelines for secure sharing and verifying the credibility of forwarded materials (Gupta et al., 2018; Roy, 2009).

Career-Related Activities

That building profiles and following industry content are frequent shows SNS' growing role in career development. Indian youth appear to be using SNS instrumentally—to find internships, visibility, and professional learning—mirroring global shifts toward digital professional self-branding (Mude & Undale, 2023; Luchman et al., 2014). Career-oriented SNS use is a positive pathway for social mobility and skill acquisition but may produce pressure to curate an “employable” online identity (Mude & Undale, 2023; Luchman et al., 2014).

Information & Education

High rates for news and tutorials suggest SNS act as a primary information ecosystem for youth (Petrosyan, 2024; Lai, 2019). Tutorials (51) and study groups (44) show educational appropriation of SNS affordances, particularly during the growth of remote learning and peer-organized study channels. While SNS democratize access to learning resources, they also distribute misinformation—necessitating emphasis on source evaluation and digital literacy. Educators can harness SNS for microlearning and peer support while teaching verification skills (Petrosyan, 2024; Lai, 2019; Gupta & Bashir, 2018).

Love and/or Sexual Experience

Romantic/sexual uses are prominent, with flirting and profile browsing especially frequent. This aligns with research showing dating apps and SNS are common arenas for courtship and sexual exploration among emerging adults (Sumter et al., 2019; Couch et al., 2012). Sexting and dating app use indicate risky-boundary behaviours that raise privacy and consent concerns (Sumter et al., 2019; Couch et al., 2012; Strubel & Petrie, 2017).

Self-Expression

Self-expression scored very high (58 for writing posts/blogs), suggesting SNS are core spaces for identity exploration and narrative construction (Steele & Brown, 1995; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). Sharing creative work (49) indicates that platforms are both exhibition spaces and feedback economies. Self-expression supports psychosocial development and creativity; however, reliance on external validation (likes/comments) can tie self-worth to metrics (Vogel et al., 2014). Interventions should promote intrinsic motivation for creativity and teach resilience around online feedback (Steele & Brown, 1995; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Vogel et al., 2014).

Shopping

Shopping and discovery are significant: influencer content drives discovery (49). This commercialization of SNS aligns with research documenting how visual platforms facilitate impulsive and aspirational consumption (Jarman et al., 2021). Youth trust peer and influencer recommendations, often more than traditional advertising (Jarman et al., 2021; Mude & Undale, 2023).

Photo/Video Capturing & Editing

This domain is the single strongest in raw count—filters/editing (61) and aesthetic posting (57)—showing that image production and curation are core practices. Heavy emphasis on visual curation feeds identity presentation and social comparison dynamics (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Dumas et al., 2016). While creative editing can be empowering and skill-building, it also fosters appearance pressures and potentially unrealistic self-standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Dumas et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Taken together, these frequencies show Indian youth using SNS in **multi-functional** ways—social, instrumental, expressive, commercial, and intimate. Many behaviours are adaptive (information seeking, career networking, sustaining ties), but others carry risk (excessive passing time, FoMO, privacy/sexual risk, appearance pressure). The results support the enduring value of Uses and Gratifications Theory while underscoring the need to expand UGT taxonomies to include contemporary, platform-specific motives (e.g., content creation, transactional media transfer, professional branding). Policy makers, educators, and platform designers should treat SNS as complex ecosystems that can be leveraged for positive outcomes while mitigating harm via literacy, design choices, and mental-health supports.

The strong presence of information/education-related motives suggests that SNS can be strategically integrated into academic environments for collaborative learning, digital literacy, and skill development. The prevalence of passive use and high engagement in entertainment and relationship-maintenance activities underscores the need for awareness programs on healthy digital habits and online safety. The emergence of domains like transfer of media and photo/video editing points to opportunities for improving user-friendly creative tools while ensuring data privacy and reducing addictive design elements. Understanding the motivations behind SNS use can aid in designing targeted interventions for overuse, FoMO, and comparison-based anxiety. The findings reinforce that motivations are shaped by sociocultural context, and India's rapidly growing digital ecosystem demands localized frameworks beyond Western-centric models.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the multifaceted motivations driving Indian youth to use Social Networking Sites (SNS) through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U>). While several domains align with existing literature, others emerged uniquely from this sample, reflecting the evolving role of SNS in contemporary digital culture. The findings confirm the dynamic and multifunctional nature of SNS use among Indian youth, underscoring both their social and utilitarian significance. Additionally, the results highlight the nuanced ways in which these platforms intersect with personal identity, relationships, leisure, and professional aspirations, providing a culturally contextualized understanding of SNS engagement in India.

Future research could track how motivations for SNS use evolve over time, especially with the rise of new platforms and shifting digital trends. Cross-national studies could compare Indian youth's motivations with those in other countries to assess the role of cultural context in SNS engagement. Investigating motivations separately for platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp could yield platform-specific insights for targeted policy and design. Exploring the relationship between specific motivations (e.g., self-expression, love/sexual experiences) and outcomes such as mental health, academic performance, or career success. Extending the research to rural youth and marginalized populations would provide a more comprehensive view of SNS use patterns across socio-economic strata.

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Conflict of Interest

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