

Impact of Social Media Content on Children and Young Adults

Saif Sayyed

Department of Computer Applications
Sinhgad Institute of Business
Administration and Research
Pune, India

Prof. Rubina Sheikh

Department of Computer Applications
Sinhgad Institute of Business
Administration and Research
Pune, India

Abstract—The rapid proliferation of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook has reshaped how children and young adults between the ages of 10 and 25 engage with information, peers, and cultural norms. This paper investigates the differential effects of four content categories—educational, entertainment, violent, and aspirational lifestyle—on the psychological well-being and behavioral patterns of young digital users. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire administered to 30 respondents spanning multiple educational backgrounds, and the responses were subjected to One-Way ANOVA, Chi-Square, correlation, and regression tests. Results show that while educationally oriented content is linked to gains in critical thinking and learning motivation, sustained consumption of violent or idealized lifestyle material correlates with measurable increases in anxiety, interpersonal aggression, and diminished self-worth. Parental involvement emerged as a protective variable, with supervised users consistently exhibiting more balanced online habits. The paper argues that closing the gap between growing platform usage and limited digital literacy requires coordinated action from educators, policymakers, and platform developers alike.

Keywords—social media content, digital well-being, youth behavior, psychological impact, digital literacy, parental supervision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Across age groups, digital platforms have fundamentally altered the pace and texture of everyday communication, but nowhere is this shift more consequential than among children and adolescents. Unlike previous generations who navigated a comparatively smaller media landscape, today's young users are exposed to algorithmically curated streams of content that blend education, peer culture, advertising, and provocative material within a single scrolling session. While researchers have separately studied the benefits of e-learning tools or the harms of violent media, very few studies attempt to compare these content streams against each other under a unified empirical framework.

The psychological development of individuals under 25 is still in active flux; executive functions, impulse control, and identity formation all remain works-in-progress well into early adulthood [3]. This developmental openness makes young users particularly receptive to behavioral modeling from what they observe online, whether that means replicating a study method from an educational channel or internalizing an unrealistic body image from a lifestyle influencer. This study was motivated by the need to quantify these divergent outcomes and to identify practical levers—such as parental oversight and digital literacy education—that can tip the balance toward positive engagement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory [1] remains one of the most applicable frameworks for understanding how young people are shaped by mediated content. Bandura demonstrated that observation alone—without direct reinforcement—is sufficient for behavior acquisition. On social platforms where peer behavior is continuously visible and implicitly rewarded through likes and shares, this observational loop operates at a scale Bandura could not have anticipated.

Anderson and Bushman [2] provided empirical grounding for a link between violent media exposure and short-term

spikes in aggressive cognition and behavior. Their General Aggression Model treats repeated exposure as a priming mechanism that gradually lowers the threshold for hostile interpretation of ambiguous social cues. More recently, Twenge et al. [3] tracked cohort-level data and found that the post-2012 surge in smartphone and social media use among adolescents coincides with marked deterioration in self-reported happiness and psychological resilience, particularly among girls.

Despite this body of evidence, the existing literature tends to isolate individual content categories rather than placing them in direct comparison. Kuss and Griffiths [4] noted that social networking behaviors vary considerably depending on the type of interaction, yet few studies leverage that variation to evaluate relative impact. This paper treats content category as the primary independent variable, a design choice that allows for a more nuanced and actionable analysis.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was selected to capture a broad snapshot of social media usage and its self-reported emotional consequences. The instrument was developed as a structured Google Form containing closed-ended and Likert-scale items covering five thematic areas: daily usage duration, content category preference, emotional response, behavioral change, and the degree of parental or guardian involvement in online activity.

Thirty respondents were recruited through purposive sampling from student communities across Pune, ensuring variation in age (10–25 years), gender, and educational stage. While this sample size constrains generalizability, it is appropriate for a pilot-level investigation intended to establish effect directions and guide future full-scale studies. Fig. 1 shows the role distribution of respondents who participated in the survey.

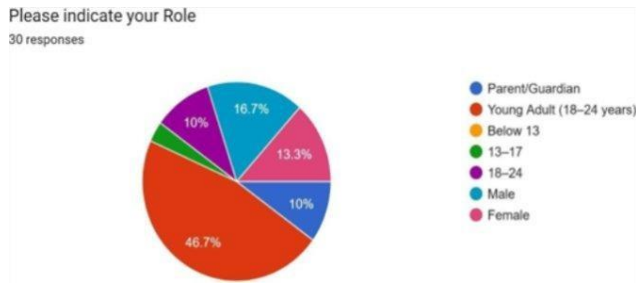


Fig. 1. Respondent Role Distribution

Statistical processing was conducted using One-Way ANOVA to test mean differences in emotional outcomes across content categories, Chi-Square tests to assess association between usage frequency and behavioral change, Pearson correlation to examine relationships between screen time and self-reported anxiety, and linear regression to estimate the predictive weight of parental supervision on digital habit quality.

IV. PROPOSED WORK

The core contribution of this paper is a comparative analysis framework that positions four distinct content types—educational, entertainment, violent, and aspirational lifestyle—as discrete treatment conditions within a survey-based study. Rather than treating ‘social media use’ as a monolithic variable, the research disaggregates it to reveal the content-specific pathways through which outcomes like creativity, anxiety, or aggression emerge.

The study further proposes that parental digital engagement—defined not as simple time restriction but as active co-viewing and guided discussion—functions as a moderator variable. This framing has practical implications: instead of prescribing blanket screen time limits, the findings point toward relational strategies that families and schools can adopt to improve outcomes without eliminating the genuine educational benefits that platforms can offer.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Usage duration data showed that 53.3% of participants spent between one and three hours on social media per day, while a further 20% reported spending between three and five hours daily. Fig. 2 illustrates the full distribution of daily screen time across the respondent pool.

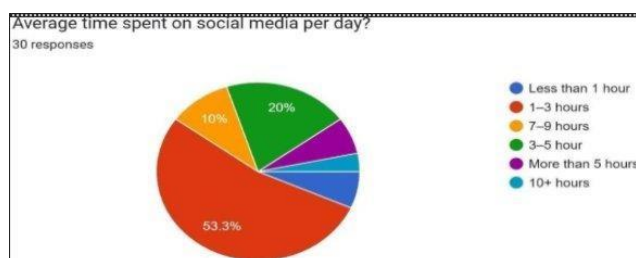


Fig. 2. Average Time Spent on Social Media Per Day

Entertainment and short-form video emerged as the dominant content categories, consumed by 40% of respondents on a daily basis. Educational or informative content accounted for 16.7% of primary viewership. Fig. 3

presents the complete breakdown of preferred content types among participants.

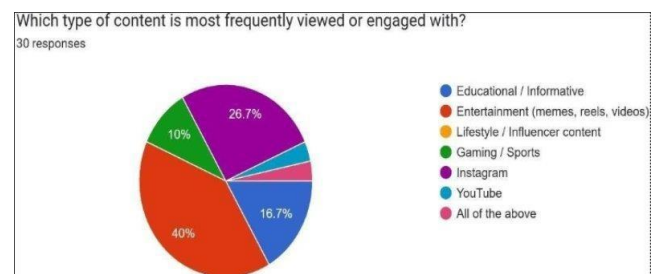


Fig. 3. Content Type Most Frequently Viewed or Engaged With

When asked about emotional after-effects, 61.9% described their mood as moderately impacted following extended social media sessions, with 14.3% reporting a very high degree of emotional influence. Fig. 4 shows the distribution of perceived emotional impact across the survey population.

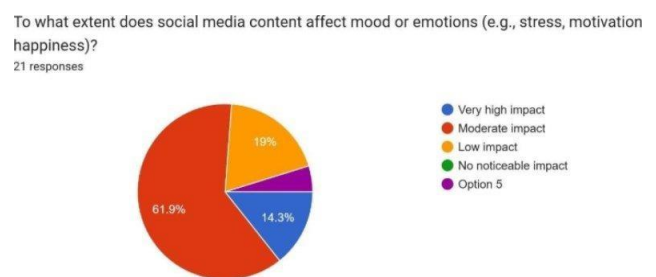


Fig. 4. Extent to Which Social Media Affects Mood or Emotions

On the question of behavioral change, 52.4% of participants acknowledged experiencing some minor changes attributable to social media content, while 19% reported significant behavioral shifts. One-Way ANOVA analysis yielded F-values that exceeded the critical threshold at the 0.05 significance level across all four content categories, confirming that differences in emotional outcomes between groups are statistically meaningful.

VI. FINDINGS

Educational content stood out as the category most consistently associated with favorable outcomes: users who primarily consumed educational videos and tutorials reported higher levels of confidence in problem-solving and a greater tendency toward self-directed learning. Motivational and skill-building content produced similar, though slightly attenuated, positive effects.

Violent content produced the sharpest negative response. Respondents with high exposure to graphic or conflict-heavy media scored markedly lower on self-reported calmness and demonstrated a greater likelihood of endorsing aggressive problem-solving strategies in hypothetical scenarios. Lifestyle content, while less dramatically harmful, correlated with increased body dissatisfaction and a heightened tendency toward unfavorable social comparison. Fig. 5 captures the self-reported behavioral change patterns observed across the participant group.

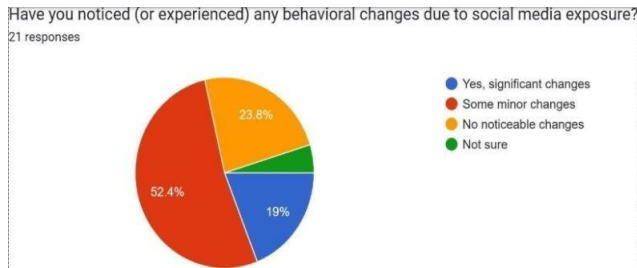


Fig. 5. Behavioral Changes Due to Social Media Exposure

A particularly robust finding concerned parental engagement. Participants who reported regular parental co-use or discussion around online content scored notably better on measures of emotional regulation and media skepticism—suggesting that adult mediation may be as important as the content itself in shaping outcomes.

VII. FUTURE SCOPE

Expanding the sample to include participants from semi-urban and rural contexts would significantly enhance the representativeness of findings, given that digital access patterns and family media supervision norms differ considerably across socioeconomic settings. A longitudinal design tracking the same cohort over 12 to 24 months would allow causal inference rather than the associative conclusions possible in this cross-sectional design.

Platform-specific analysis represents another productive direction. The algorithmic structures of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube differ materially in how they surface content, and these differences likely produce divergent psychological footprints even when the surface content category appears identical. Incorporating passive digital trace data, where ethically permissible, alongside self-report measures would substantially strengthen measurement validity in future iterations.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

The 30-participant sample, drawn primarily from urban Pune, places meaningful constraints on how broadly these findings can be generalized. Social media behaviors and family supervision norms vary with geography, income, and cultural context in ways this dataset cannot fully capture. The voluntary recruitment method also introduces the possibility that respondents with stronger opinions about media's effects were more motivated to participate.

Additionally, all dependent variable data rest on self-report, a format known to produce recall errors and social desirability bias when participants are asked to characterize their own emotional states or behavioral changes. Future work incorporating experience-sampling methods or objective screen-time logs would reduce this vulnerability considerably.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study makes a targeted contribution to the growing evidence base on youth and social media by disaggregating content type as the primary variable of interest. The results reinforce that the impact of digital platforms on children and young adults is not uniform: the same device, the same app,

and the same hour online can yield starkly different psychological outcomes depending on what content occupies that time. Educational material broadly supports cognitive development, while violent and idealized content carries measurable psychological costs.

What emerges most clearly is that neither blanket restriction nor passive permission is an adequate response. Structured parental engagement, school-based digital literacy curricula, and platform-level algorithmic accountability each have distinct and complementary roles to play in steering young users toward a healthier relationship with online content. As platforms grow more sophisticated in capturing attention, the urgency of these interventions will only increase.

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