

The Impact of Social Media on College-Going Graduates in India: An Analysis of Academic, Psychological, and Employability Outcomes (2014-2026)

Prashant Sharma^{1*} | Dr. Vijay Laxmi Choudhary²

¹Research Scholar, Nirwan University Jaipur.

²Assistant Professor, School of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, Nirwan University Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: prashant.s79284@gmail.com

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Abstract

The availability of affordable internet service and smart phones have affected the way the students learn, socialize and seek jobs and the Indian students have not been exempted. This report will examine the findings from literature sources from the year 2014 to 2026 on the effects of social media use on the studying college-going graduates in India using survey and research reports. The period is taken into consideration for three major reasons. Firstly, in the year 2016, affordable 4G mobile broadband was made available to all the Indian students due to the advent of Reliance Jio. Secondly, due to the lockdown occasioned by the Coronavirus pandemic from 2020-2022, the universities resorted to the adoption of remote learning using online services. Finally, the Indian job market has come to realize that the online presence of individuals is an important consideration in recruitment as shown in 2026. This report focuses on three areas of the Indian students' life. This perspective on social media is controversial. From the academic point of view, students utilize social media to exchange information and participate in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); however, extensive use of such platforms negatively affects academic achievements. It is unclear if the reason behind poor academic results is the extensive usage of resources through the computer screen or there are other reasons for both the low grade and excessive Internet activity. From the psychological perspective, problematic social media utilization was correlated with the social anxiety, depression, disruptions in sleep, cyberbullying and such psychological phenomena as upward comparison and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). The fact that this statement is probably the only true one that can be claimed here is because of the lack of longitudinal research in the field; therefore, all studies are conducted using self-reporting techniques. However, from the professional perspective, things are quite different. LinkedIn and other similar social networks became a source of employment and for students coming from less prestigious universities (Tier-2 and Tier-3), the social network can replace social capital of the elite network that prestigious universities introduce their students to. There is a price for visibility; researchers speak about "employment anxiety".

Keywords: Social Media, Internet Service, Coronavirus Pandemic, FOMO, Employment Anxiety.

Introduction

Over forty million students have entered educational institutions of India and are studying at tens of thousands of higher educational institutions. In 2014-2026 this group has been experiencing rapid and unequal digital transformation. Social media sites and mobile applications transitioned from mere source of entertainment into one of the means for acquiring knowledge, receiving positive social feedback and preparing for employment. Therefore, analysis of this digital transformation needs identification of specific trajectory of technology development in India.

The time period can be subdivided into three major stages. First, in 2014-2015 penetration rate of internet was rather low and usage of social networking sites was limited to urban areas, computer devices and costly 3G internet connection⁵. Second, in 2016 cheap 4G mobile broadband has become available due to the launch of Jio and became instantaneous. The students of Tier-2, Tier-3 cities and rural areas could use WhatsApp, Facebook, X(formerly Twitter), Reddit, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram without any problems⁴. Third, in 2020-2022 the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic made education and administrative processes online and legitimized the use of these platforms¹.

Today in India, the social media usage is what sets the pace of day-to-day life of a typical graduate. Exactly these apps like WhatsApp and Telegram are what makes it possible to attend classes, receive notifications and participate in tutorials². YouTube becomes the go-to place to learn all things not included in lectures². Instagram and X are where one creates their public identity, their political views and even their mood¹⁰. LinkedIn is the platform that enables one to make a transition from university studies to work in general, or, to say, the beginning of a career¹³. Such a widespread issue cannot be judged positive or negative in an easy manner.

The current report contains the results on such issues as learning, mental health and employment. Moreover, some indirect effects are also discussed here: how the mindless browsing consumes working memory; how being online impacts the feeling of anxiety and exhaustion in everyday life; how networking online correlates with discrimination because of attending a not-so-prestigious educational institution in India. The aim of this report is to provide useful information to the people described above.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

• The Duality of Social Media in Academic Performance

Research related to social media use and academic performance has conflicting results. The first stream of research considers mobile devices as a source of distractions. In case the social networking app is always active, it distracts from the uninterrupted concentration required for the process of studying. Following the Cognitive Load Theory, this line of research argues that SMM creates an additional cognitive load for learners¹⁶. Juggling between classes and social networking demands working memory and takes away the cognitive resources needed for learning¹. Students who multitask frequently are shown to have lower GPA, complete their homework later and experience academic stress⁵.

The second stream of research based on socio-constructivist theories of learning sees social media applications as an informal learning environment in case the formal one is limiting in some way. Research conducted among Indian learners shows how such apps as WhatsApp and YouTube are used for tutoring and immediate removal of any uncertainties outside of class¹. These learning environments disregard the schedule, curriculum, and even the hierarchy of the traditional learning environment¹. Moreover, they give access to MOOCs and other educational resources¹. In the learning environments where there is a poor ratio of staff to students, they play an important role.

It varies from one person to another. Students from STEM subjects typically utilize these platforms as a means for cooperation, code sharing, and learning about some technical things, thus making them more engaged in academics¹⁸. Arts and humanities students typically use them for leisure purposes, including socializing, thus making them more procrastinating¹⁸. Personality factors are also crucial since introverts are much more likely to join academic discussion via digital devices because of their personality¹.

• Psychological well-being, identity, and mental health outcomes

Taking into account psychological perspective, the primary concern of the latest years of developing knowledge about Indian students was Problematic Social Media Use (PSMU) and internet addiction. Regarding mechanisms, Social Comparison Theory and FOMO are used quite often. College years are the time when peer acceptance and identity become the most important aspects of people's lives⁸.

There is also meta-analysis studies and longitudinal researches linking PSMU with depression, social anxiety and sleep disorders¹⁵. "Emotional exhaustion" theory claims that continuous communication, identity construction, and like counting processes can be exhausting enough already⁸. Blue light emitted during using screens at night reduces melatonin production and makes people have less sleep¹⁵.

Cyberbullying is one of the simplest repercussions. The feeling of anonymity provided by the Internet loosens restraints, and the effects on the victim are very serious¹. Victims of cyberbullying feel more stressed, while the worst-case scenario is suicidal thoughts²².

Another interesting paradox is associated with the problem of isolation. Too much time spent online is one of the reasons why people stopped maintaining real face-to-face relationships and started keeping superficial online relations⁸. But during the pandemic-induced lockouts, social networks became the only way of communication for many students. It was evident from the experience of the pandemic that the important factor is the way of using these platforms: browsing online was replacing offline relations but did not compensate for them, while being engaged in the community combated isolation⁸.

• **Social Media as a Catalyst for Employability and Career Readiness**

There is a recognized "employability gap" between higher education and the labor market in India, where hundreds of thousands of graduates appear every year but which are not properly equipped with the communication, collaboration and critical thinking skills essential for employment²⁵. Surveys made by government and industry reveal that many engineering and management graduates need extensive training before they can be employed and are usually employed in occupations below their qualifications²⁵.

In today's market, social media and especially LinkedIn play the role of matching potential employees with companies as well as carrying out unofficial background checks²⁸. On the one hand, an appealing online profile acts as a proxy for social capital and identity capital¹³.

The conventional recruitment practice relied on pedigree, which means that the graduates of elite institutions – IITs and IIMs – were considered employable whereas students from Tier-2 and Tier-3 colleges would be automatically rejected. Professional networking sites and standardized employability tests such as AMCAT and E-Litmus may be the solution that will allow avoiding the filtering. A student having an appealing online profile and publications along with direct communication with recruiters can demonstrate his/her worth regardless of which college he/she graduated from³.

Nevertheless, working on the Internet has its drawbacks too. The phenomenon of "employment anxiety" has become rather popular among young professionals³¹. The time you spend online working is inevitably accompanied by some sort of comparison, which is quite similar to what goes on in Instagram, except here your comparisons are not related to appearances or holidays, but rather internship and job offers. So professional websites solve one problem and create another.

Hypotheses

From the literature above, the report tests four hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1 (Distraction vs engagement):** Time spent on social media correlates negatively with academic performance, through cognitive load and multitasking fatigue; purposeful use for study and networking, by contrast, improves outcomes.
- **Hypothesis 2 (Psychological toll):** PSMU, especially passive use, FOMO, and late-night use, predicts higher levels of social anxiety, depression, and sleep disruption among Indian college students.
- **Hypothesis 3 (Employability premium):** Active, strategic use of professional networks such as LinkedIn improves career expectations and employability, particularly for graduates of non-elite institutions, by compensating for thin social capital.
- **Hypothesis 4 (Self-regulation as moderator):** Time management, emotional intelligence, and digital literacy blunt the academic and psychological costs of social media multitasking.

Findings and Analytical Synthesis

• **The Duality of Academic Engagement and Cognitive Overload**

A survey carried out in Indian colleges suggests that nearly all students in colleges use social networking sites and the most common social networks are WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram². Although the academic value of these applications is known to the students, yet the time invested is for recreational purposes only. This can be explained using the Uses and Gratifications Theory as the pleasure derived from the relief from boredom and stress is immediate as compared to studies¹².

Uses of Social Networking as mentioned by the students are given in the table below. The duality of the medium becomes clear from the last column.

Purpose of usage	% of Students Endorsing	Main platforms	Typical effect on academic focus
Entertainment, escapism, passing time	74% - 58%	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook	High distraction, cognitive fatigue, procrastination
Communication and peer networking	61% - 78%	WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram	Variable; depends heavily on peer-group norms
Academic and educational resources	32% - 62%	YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn	Better resource access, quick clarification of concepts
Employment opportunities and research	~35%	LinkedIn, X (Twitter)	Career readiness, professional networking, upskilling

Note: percentages aggregated from survey data on Indian undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts². Underlying surveys allowed multiple responses.

It is also true that such surveys capture the crux of the controversy outlined in this report. The majority of students, even up to 76%, feel that social media helps them connect with their fellow learners, become a part of the academic milieu and do their homework through resource exchange². On the contrary, more than 64% of the same learners see social media as a considerable source of distraction that takes away their time to focus, distracts them during study sessions and leads to procrastination².

The cause of distraction lies in the effects of multitasking. While reading a textbook and responding to messages on WhatsApp and getting notifications from Instagram, termed here as Social Media Multitasking, leads to a huge increase in extraneous cognitive load⁶. It is true that regression analyses show that unstructured screen time is inversely related to GPA, test results and productivity¹. The working memory of a human being is limited and constant distractions affect the process of encoding in memory¹⁵.

Indeed, it is intriguing to observe the existence of such a discipline-based differentiation, implying not viewing the "student" as a single category. The t-test results indicate that Science and Engineering students perceive their engagement in the learning process via social media higher as compared to Arts students (the means being 3.62 and 3.41 respectively; $p < 0.05$)¹⁸. And why is it so? This is because of the interview results, indicating that science students use these websites to conduct some research, exchange programming codes, solve mathematics problems, engage in technical classes, while arts students know the entertainment facet of the very social media sites¹⁸. In all probability, this may be attributed to the essence of STEM activities. Introverts visit websites to share information with their peers as the computer screen does not demand from them to utter anything in the classroom¹.

• Trajectories of Mental Health and Social Anxiety Loop

The findings of this psychological part do not provide any encouragement. From 2014 until 2026, social anxiety, internet addiction, and generalized anxiety are becoming more frequent among university students in India²⁰.

Table 2 illustrates the psychological factors correlated with PSMU in Indian college students based on the psychometrically valid measures (the DASS-21, Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale.

Psychological Domain	How it shows up in Students	Main Mediating Factors
Social anxiety	Avoidance of face-to-face interaction, fear of peer evaluation, low relational confidence	Upward social comparison, FOMO, over-reliance on text-based communication
Sleep disturbance	Insomnia, delayed sleep onset, daytime fatigue, disrupted rhythms	Late-night scrolling, blue light suppressing melatonin, emotional arousal before sleep
Depression and loneliness	Feelings of inadequacy, isolation despite high connectivity, low self-esteem	Passive consumption of curated peer content, lack of deep emotional support
Cyberbullying trauma	Acute stress, academic withdrawal, fear of harassment, suicidal ideation in severe cases	Perpetrator anonymity, weak institutional reporting, the public and permanent nature of online attacks

Data Synthesised from Psychological Surveys and Meta-Analyses⁸.

The key emergent pattern in the data set is the vicious cycle that is created due to interrelation between social anxiety and PSMU. Introverts or socially anxious individuals have a tendency to seek the shelter in the realm of social media due to the control that one can get there because of the opportunity to think before responding, to present oneself consciously and to avoid spontaneous face-to-face contact¹⁰. This shelter becomes a trap. The more the person spends his/her time in the virtual environment, the less social skills he/she develops, feeling insecure in engaging in these activities⁸.

Identity formation is another issue of ongoing debate in the data set. Sentiment analysis of the learners' posts reveals that social media are widely used for emotional management and identity formation¹⁰. This is beneficial, but the metrically-oriented nature of social media makes this process even more stressful. Learners experience the feelings of guilt over the screen time and "reply anxiety" which implies being available^{24/78}.

However, cyberbullying still remains an ongoing issue on the digital campus of India due to lack of supervision and proper enforcement, which contribute to this problem. There is more acute stress score apart from self-esteem and mood in the case of cyberbully victims measured by DASS-21 and Rosenberg scale²². This injury is exacerbated by the fact that cyberbullying is public, permanent and searchable, with the victim transitioning from his/her phone to the classroom²².

However, there is also a ray of hope in the form of a study that has emerged. The randomized control trials of internet-based guided self-help and CBT intervention have proved effective in treating cases of generalized anxiety disorder among Indian university students. Through the very screens, which are partially responsible for the problem, therapy is carried out in the form of reframe and mindfulness exercises³³.

• Navigating the Employability Gap and Professional Networking

Undoubtedly, the most important structural change that occurred during 2014-2026 is the emergence of social media as a gateway to graduate employment. There is something strange about the structure of India's labor market – millions of college graduates as well as constant complaints from employers of lack of candidates suitable for hiring. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, the rate of unemployment among young graduates is 20%, which is higher than the national average, while millions of others are underemployed in occupations, where the qualification is wasted²⁷.

The most common explanation is the absence of soft skills such as communication, flexibility, critical thinking and leadership²⁵. Indeed, one can assume that in such a market social media works as a signaling device.

Table 3 below demonstrates the principal frictions in the Indian graduate labor market and the ways how social media helps to solve them.

Labour Market Friction	Traditional Indian Context	Digital / Social Media Mechanism
Institutional pedigree bias	Heavy reliance on Tier-1 campus placements (IITs, IIMs, NITs) as a proxy for talent	Students from Tier-2/3 colleges build direct visibility with recruiters through LinkedIn content, GitHub, digital portfolios
Soft skills hard to assess	Difficult to gauge from static paper resumes and transcripts	Employers observe communication style, online discourse, and network quality before interview
Information frictions	Limited visibility into emerging roles, industry trends, hidden job markets	Algorithmic exposure to industry leaders, virtual networking events, open-source skill communities
Competency validation	Over-reliance on university grades of varying regional standards and grade inflation	Standardised digital employability tests (AMCAT, E-Litmus) shared and validated on social networks

Data synthesised from labour market, human resources, and employability studies³.

This thesis statement can be proven by conducting an experiment in the form of a correspondence test. Batheja, Hirshleifer, and Kaur sent 16,944 fake resumes in response to 1,412 real job openings for engineering graduates at small to medium-sized IT firms in eight Indian cities; candidates were randomly assigned a degree from a Tier-2 ranked institution or a Tier-3 unranked institution, certification score, and a name of a woman³. The story of digital credentialing success proves

to be a lot more complicated. In fact, employers were not interested in any of the signals: going from Tier-2 ranked institution to Tier-3 unranked one did not make any difference in callbacks, same way as having high or low certification score. There was only one thing which was proven, and which disproved the typical worries: resumes with female names received a slightly higher number of callbacks. So, for graduates of Tier-2 and Tier-3 institutions, the dream of being able to replace one's education via online credentials is still a hope.

This is because it undermines the "democratising" aspect of these professional networks. Instead of providing narrow access to students from elite universities, LinkedIn provides wider access as those who do not have access to the recruiters through the placement network of the elite universities get access to the recruiters whom they would otherwise never contact, thus accumulating identity capital and social capital¹³.

Third-order issue of professionalization via digital tools includes the concept of "employment anxiety"³¹. The time spent on professional networks correlates with career-related stress, and the reasons behind this correlation lie in the same principle – Instagram makes people compare appearance and lifestyles, while LinkedIn makes them compare internships, credentials, and employment offers; the rest is obvious: inadequacy, impostor syndrome, and overload¹⁴.

Finally, the digital footprint is reciprocal. On the one hand, the good profile attracts the recruiters, but on the other hand, the bad profile is enough to make any application dead before it reaches the interviewing stage¹⁰. Employers not only check the profiles on LinkedIn but also on Instagram and X of the candidates, and those candidates who display their unprofessionalism and lack of communication skills on these networks are immediately disqualified.

The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-Regulation

This connection is the same in all three cases: the technology itself is fairly neutral and the outcome depends on how it is used. The role of emotional intelligence, which involves such components as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, appears to play a moderating⁴⁰ role. Those students who have greater emotional intelligence use networks for organizing study groups and conflict management, not for getting into those⁴⁰.

Managing time operates in the same fashion. Multitasking is inversely related to academic achievement; however, those students who are able to distinguish time for learning deeply and surfing get the benefits of online cooperation without GPA drop¹⁶. Finally, success and failure of online graduates may depend on fairly ordinary behavior patterns.

Conclusion

Over the time period between 2014 and 2026, social media stopped being an add-on to education in India, turning out to be the fundamental element of the educational process itself, self-assessment and professional networking.

The data can hardly be boiled down to any obvious conclusion. What is important about the issue under discussion is how social media is used. As the tool of collaborative learning and professional networking, social media becomes really helpful. It gives a student from a Tier-3 university the chance to receive tutorials, MOOCs, and get in touch with potential employers on the same terms as a student from a prestigious urban university. When used passively and addictively, the same social media distracts attention, overloads the working memory and demotivates its users.

What is particularly disturbing about the psychological data provided is that students in the modern society suffer from social anxiety, sleep disturbances, and employment stress more often than their predecessors a decade ago. The reasons are quite alike for all people – constant comparing oneself to more successful peers, the effort of building up one's own digital identity and cyberbullying.

Ultimately, social media is just that, an amplifier. It amplifies one's capability to learn and engage as well as their capability to get distracted and compared. For today's generation of Indian graduates, using social media in a deliberate way cannot be considered a soft skill anymore; it has become a necessity in all senses of the term.

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