Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Digital Media: Implications for Youth Mental Health and Well-Being in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of digital media technologies has reshaped the psychological landscape of Indian youth, simultaneously opening new avenues for cultural expression and posing significant threats to mental well-being. This paper examines the relationship between Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)-particularly those embedded within the Indian philosophical, communicative, and ecological traditions-and youth mental health outcomes in the context of contemporary digital media engagement. Drawing on the IKS-Digital Well-Being Integration Model (IDWIM) developed for this study, the paper argues that the erosion of IKS-grounded communicative practices among youth, coupled with uncritical absorption of digital media content, contributes to psychological distress, identity fragmentation, and diminished community cohesion. Conversely, intentional reintegration of IKS values-such as those

found in the concepts of dharma (righteous conduct), satya (truthfulness), ahimsa (nonviolence), and swadhyaya (self-study)-into digital media literacy frameworks can serve as a protective mechanism for youth well-being. The study employs a mixed-methods design, incorporating a systematic literature review of 85 peer-reviewed sources, semi-structured interviews with 40 educators and youth workers across six Indian states, and a thematic analysis of IKS texts including the Upanishads, Arthashastra, and Charaka Samhita. Findings reveal a significant disconnect between IKS-informed communicative values and prevailing digital media narratives consumed by Indian youth, contributing to elevated anxiety, loneliness, and reduced life satisfaction. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for integrating IKS principles into digital media education, institutional policy, and psychological intervention frameworks, offering a culturally grounded pathway toward youth well-being in the digital age.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, digital media, youth mental health, well-being, Indian philosophy, media literacy, dharma.

Introduction

The intersection of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and digital media presents one of the most compelling and underexplored areas in contemporary youth psychology, communication studies, and educational policy. In India, this intersection is particularly salient: a nation of over 600 million individuals below the age of 25 (United Nations Population Fund, 2022) is navigating the simultaneous forces of profound digital transformation and a growing national policy emphasis on revitalizing indigenous epistemologies through initiatives such as the National Education Policy 2020 and the Indian Knowledge Systems initiative of the University Grants Commission (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). Yet the psychological consequences of this dual navigation-inhabiting a digitally saturated world while being called to reconnect with ancient systems of knowledge-remain insufficiently theorized and empirically examined.

The mental health landscape of Indian youth is cause for urgent concern. The National Mental Health Survey (2016) estimated that approximately 7.3% of Indian youth suffer from mental disorders, with anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders constituting the most prevalent presentations. More recent data from the COVID-19 pandemic period indicate a

significant worsening of these trends, with screen time among youth increasing by an average of 4.5 hours per day and digital media consumption becoming the dominant mode of information acquisition, social interaction, and entertainment (Sharma et al., 2021). The implications of this shift for psychological well-being are complex and context-dependent, shaped not merely by the volume of digital media consumption but by the nature, quality, and cultural alignment of the content consumed.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, broadly defined as the accumulated bodies of knowledge, practices, values, and worldviews developed over millennia by indigenous and traditional communities (UNESCO, 2017), offer a distinctive and underutilized resource for understanding and promoting youth well-being in digital environments. In the Indian context, IKS encompasses a vast philosophical heritage including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Arthashastra, Yoga Sutras, Charaka Samhita, and a rich diversity of regional oral traditions, ethical frameworks, and ecological knowledge systems. These traditions embed sophisticated understandings of mind, consciousness, community, and communication that remain remarkably relevant to contemporary psychological challenges despite their antiquity (Balodhi & Keshavan, 2011).

The communicative values embedded within IKS are particularly instructive for the digital age. The concept of satya (truthfulness in speech and communication), for example, offers a counterpoint to the epidemic of misinformation and performative identity construction that characterizes much of contemporary social media (Misra, 2020). Ahimsa (nonviolence), extended to communicative acts, provides a framework for addressing cyberbullying and online hostility. Brahmacharya (disciplined restraint), while traditionally understood in terms of sensory and sexual conduct, has been reinterpreted by contemporary scholars as a principle of mindful consumption applicable to digital media engagement (Sharma & Prabhu, 2019). These IKS principles, far from being anachronistic relics, represent a living epistemological resource with direct implications for digital media literacy and youth psychological well-being.

This paper proceeds from the premise that the contemporary crisis of youth mental health in India cannot be adequately addressed through Western psychological frameworks alone, however valuable these may be, but requires the development of culturally grounded, IKS-informed approaches to media literacy, mental health promotion, and educational practice (Aarzoo & Lal, 2024). The paper makes three original contributions: first, it develops the IKS-Digital Well-Being Integration Model (IDWIM) as a theoretical framework for understanding

the relationship between IKS engagement, digital media use, and youth well-being; second, it presents original empirical findings from a mixed-methods study examining how IKS awareness moderates the psychological effects of digital media on Indian youth; and third, it offers concrete, policy-relevant recommendations for embedding IKS principles in digital media education and youth mental health promotion programs. In doing so, the paper contributes to the emerging interdisciplinary field of culturally situated media psychology and advances the broader project of decolonizing psychological knowledge production in Indian academic contexts (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on digital media and youth well-being, IKS and mental health, and the interface between the two. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 reports the findings. Section 6 discusses the implications. Section 7 addresses limitations, and Section 8 concludes with recommendations.

The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by converging epidemiological and sociological trends. India's National Mental Health Survey (NIMHANS, 2016) established that 13.7% of Indians above the age of 18 suffer from mental health disorders, with prevalence rates considerably higher among urban youth. More recent data from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR, 2023) indicate that anxiety disorders and depression have risen sharply among 15–24 year olds, a cohort that has grown up as digital natives within a mobile-first internet ecosystem. Concurrently, data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023) document that Indian youth spend an average of 6.4 hours daily on digital devices, with social media platforms accounting for 2.8 hours of this engagement. These statistics are not merely incidental context-they establish the epidemiological baseline against which any wellness framework must be evaluated.

What has been conspicuously absent from mainstream public health and educational policy responses to this crisis is serious engagement with India's own civilizational resources for psychological well-being (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). The discourse on youth digital wellness has been dominated by imported frameworks: time-management apps derived from behavioral economics, mindfulness programs adapted from MBSR, and cognitive-behavioral psychoeducation derived from Western clinical psychology. While these have merit, they represent an impoverishment of the available toolkit-particularly in a country where Ayurveda,

Yoga, the Upanishadic tradition, and classical Indian philosophy have constituted a living psychological science for millennia.

The present paper argues that this omission is not merely a missed opportunity but an active source of cultural estrangement. When the psychological distress of Indian youth is diagnosed and treated exclusively through Western categories, a hidden message is communicated: that the indigenous wisdom tradition has nothing to say about contemporary life, that modernity and tradition are incommensurable, and that the Indian young person must choose between cultural identity and psychological health. This is a false dilemma that the IKS tradition is uniquely equipped to dissolve-by demonstrating that its frameworks address precisely the conditions of digital-mediated existence with sophistication and practical precision.

The Panchakosha model, for instance, anticipates the bidirectional mind-body-spirit disruption that neuroscience now documents in excessive screen use. The concept of Svastha-self-rooted flourishing-names the exact deficit that social media-driven other-directedness produces. The Trigunic framework provides a qualitative taxonomy for media content evaluation that screen-time metrics utterly lack (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026). These are not merely interesting historical parallels; they are practically deployable analytical tools whose operationalization into wellness interventions this paper undertakes in systematic detail.

Literature Review

The literature on digital media and youth well-being has expanded rapidly over the past decade, generating a contested but increasingly nuanced body of evidence. Early research tended toward alarmist framings, positioning digital media use-particularly social media engagement-as uniformly harmful to adolescent psychological health. Twenge and colleagues' large-scale analyses of American youth data (Twenge et al., 2018) reported associations between increasing screen time and rising rates of depression, loneliness, and anxiety among adolescents, generating widespread media attention and policy debate. However, subsequent meta-analyses and longitudinal studies have painted a more complex picture, suggesting that the effects of digital media on well-being are highly contingent on usage patterns, content types, social context, and individual vulnerability factors (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Importantly, the vast majority of research on digital media and youth well-being has been conducted in Western contexts, predominantly in North America and Europe, with little attention to the specific cultural and epistemic contexts of the Global South. Indian scholarship in this area, while growing, remains constrained by the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks and measurement instruments that may not adequately capture the culturally specific dimensions of digital media engagement and psychological well-being among Indian youth (Avasthi et al., 2019). This methodological and theoretical gap represents a significant limitation of the existing literature and underscores the need for indigenous epistemological contributions such as IKS.

The literature on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and mental health, while sparse relative to mainstream psychological research, offers important insights. Balodhi and Keshavan (2011) provided a foundational analysis of the contributions of Indian philosophical systems-particularly Yoga, Ayurveda, and Vedanta-to the understanding and treatment of mental illness, arguing that these traditions offer sophisticated psychosomatic and psychospiritual frameworks that complement and in some respects surpass the explanatory power of Western psychiatry. Misra (2013) developed the concept of 'indigenous psychology' as a framework for rooting psychological inquiry in culturally specific epistemologies, arguing that the wholesale adoption of Western psychological categories in non-Western contexts constitutes a form of epistemic colonialism that undermines the validity of psychological knowledge production. Pandey (2011) similarly argued for a 'psychology of Indians' grounded in lived cultural realities, including the communicative and philosophical frameworks embedded within IKS.

The concept of well-being itself is differently constituted within IKS frameworks relative to dominant Western psychological models. The World Health Organization definition of mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own abilities, copes with normal stresses, works productively, and contributes to their community (WHO, 2004) captures important dimensions of psychological health but reflects primarily individualistic and productivity-oriented values (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026). In contrast, IKS frameworks tend toward relational, ecological, and transcendent conceptions of well-being. The concept of ananda (bliss or deep contentment) in Vedantic philosophy refers to a state of well-being rooted not in the satisfaction of individual desires but in the recognition of one's fundamental unity with consciousness (Sivananda, 1993). The concept of swasthya (health) in Ayurveda is similarly holistic, encompassing physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of well-being in dynamic interrelation (Lad, 2002). These IKS conceptions of well-being offer

richer frameworks for understanding what digital media environments foster or undermine in the lives of young people.

The interface between IKS and digital media is a genuinely emerging field. Sharma et al. (2020) examined the use of digital platforms to disseminate and revitalize indigenous knowledge, arguing that digital media can serve both as a vehicle for cultural transmission and as a threat to the contextual integrity of IKS. Arora (2019) analyzed the ways in which Indian youth engage with digital representations of traditional practices-yoga, Ayurveda, classical music, vernacular storytelling-and found significant variation between superficial, commodified engagement and deeper, identity-affirming engagement with IKS content. Srinivasan (2017) argued for the development of 'community informatics' frameworks that center indigenous values and epistemologies in the design and governance of digital media systems.

The psychological implications of this IKS-digital interface for youth well-being have received less direct empirical attention. Studies of cultural identity and media engagement offer relevant proxies: research consistently shows that strong cultural identity, including identification with one's indigenous or traditional heritage, is associated with higher psychological well-being, greater resilience, and lower rates of depression and anxiety among youth from minority and indigenous communities globally (Usborne & Taylor, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Conversely, cultural identity disruption-associated with experiences of colonization, forced assimilation, or rapid modernization-is associated with elevated psychological distress (Gone, 2013). The digitally mediated cultural disruption experienced by Indian youth, many of whom navigate profound disjunctions between IKS-informed familial and community contexts and Western-dominated digital media environments, can be understood as a contemporary form of this identity-disrupting process with real consequences for mental health.

The literature on digital media literacy and well-being adds a further dimension. Studies consistently show that individuals with higher levels of media literacy-including the critical capacity to analyze, evaluate, and create media content-report better psychological well-being in digital environments, including lower susceptibility to social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and misinformation-related anxiety (Ashley et al., 2013; Vahedi & Zannella, 2021). IKS frameworks, with their emphasis on viveka (discriminative wisdom), prajna (insight), and swadhyaya (self-study and reflective inquiry), can be understood as providing

epistemological resources for the development of culturally grounded media literacy capacities among Indian youth.

In summary, the literature identifies three key evidence gaps that this paper seeks to address: first, the absence of culturally grounded, IKS-informed frameworks for understanding digital media and youth well-being in India; second, the limited empirical investigation of the psychological effects of IKS engagement in digital media contexts; and third, the underutilization of IKS principles in the design of digital media literacy and mental health promotion programs for Indian youth.

A parallel literature within Indian academic psychology has developed indigenous approaches to well-being that complement and challenge Western frameworks. Mohan (2011) articulated a Vedic psychology of optimal functioning centered on the concept of Ananda (bliss) as not merely hedonic pleasure but an ontological condition of self-realization attainable through disciplined consciousness work. Balodhi (1991) proposed a comprehensive model of Indian psychiatry drawing on Charaka Samhita's eight-limbed approach to mental health, identifying psychological health with Prasanna Atma (serene soul), Prasanna Mana (serene mind), and Prasanna Indriya (serene senses)-a tripartite model whose dimensional specificity exceeds DSM-5 categorical diagnosis in capturing nuanced wellness states. More recently, Venkatesan (2019) and Paranjpe (2006) have systematically documented the theoretical coherence of Indian psychology as a scientific discipline with its own empirical commitments, not merely a pre-scientific tradition awaiting Western validation.

The digital well-being literature has increasingly documented the limitations of screen-time reduction as an isolated intervention strategy. Przybylski and Weinstein (2017), in a large-scale digital experiment with 120,000 adolescents, found that moderate digital use was associated with higher well-being than no use-a finding that challenges simplistic reduction approaches and demands more nuanced frameworks for understanding which qualities of digital engagement promote or undermine flourishing. Valkenburg et al. (2021), in a comprehensive meta-analysis and pre-registered study, found that social media effects on adolescent well-being were highly person-specific, with some youth benefiting, others harmed, and many unaffected by similar levels of use-findings consistent with IKS frameworks emphasizing individual constitutional variation (Prakriti) in responses to environmental conditions.

The contemplative neuroscience literature provides converging evidence for IKS-derived intervention hypotheses. Davidson et al. (2003) documented neuroplastic changes in prefrontal cortex activity among experienced meditators, with implications for emotional regulation, attentional control, and sense of self that map directly onto IKS constructs of Chitta Shuddhi (purification of consciousness) and Samyama (concentrated awareness). Farb et al.'s (2007) neuroimaging study documented two distinct neural modes of self-reference-narrative (self in time, self in relation to others) and experiential (present-moment sensory awareness) — and found that mindfulness training shifted participants toward experiential mode, reducing rumination and enhancing emotional equanimity. This neurological distinction maps directly onto the Yoga Sutras' differentiation of Vritti (mental fluctuations) from Pratyaya (direct consciousness), suggesting that classical Indian psychology anticipated modern neuroscience's discovery of two fundamental modes of self-processing.

The emerging field of technoference (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018)-the interruption of face-to-face interactions by digital devices-has documented specific mechanisms through which media use disrupts the relational fabric that IKS frameworks identify as essential to Manomaya Kosha well-being. Satsanga-authentic, meaning-laden community-is increasingly understood as a primary buffer against digital alienation, a finding documented independently by Cacioppo and Cacioppo's (2018) research on loneliness and health, which establishes that perceived social isolation increases physiological stress markers, impairs immune function, and disrupts sleep architecture in ways that compound the direct neurological effects of excessive screen use.

Theoretical Framework

This paper introduces the IKS-Digital Well-Being Integration Model (IDWIM) as its primary theoretical framework. IDWIM draws on three intellectual traditions: the IKS-based psychology of consciousness and well-being (particularly Vedantic and Yogic frameworks), the Uses and Gratifications Theory of media engagement (Katz et al., 1973), and the Ecological Systems Theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These three traditions are integrated to produce a model that is simultaneously culturally grounded, psychologically rigorous, and systemically sensitive.

The first component of IDWIM-IKS Well-Being Foundations-identifies five core IKS constructs relevant to digital media engagement: satya (truthfulness in communication), ahimsa (nonviolent, compassionate engagement), viveka (discriminative wisdom in information

consumption), swadhyaya (self-reflective inquiry), and santosha (contentment as a cognitive-emotional orientation). These constructs are operationalized within IDWIM not as normative prescriptions but as cognitive and behavioral resources that, when active, moderate the psychological impact of digital media consumption.

The second component-Digital Media Engagement Patterns-distinguishes between passive consumption (scrolling, viewing without critical engagement), active creation (content production, self-expression, community building), and social interaction (peer engagement, community participation) as qualitatively different modes of digital media engagement with differential effects on well-being. Drawing on Uses and Gratifications Theory, IDWIM posits that the degree to which digital media engagement fulfills fundamental psychological needs-for information, identity, social connection, and entertainment-is mediated by the user's cultural knowledge resources, including IKS awareness.

The third component-Systemic Ecological Context-positions the individual youth's digital media engagement within nested ecological systems (family, peer group, school, community, national policy context) following Bronfenbrenner's model. IDWIM argues that IKS resources are most accessible and impactful when they are reinforced at multiple ecological levels simultaneously, underscoring the need for systemic, multilevel interventions rather than individually targeted approaches.

The integrative hypothesis of IDWIM is that IKS Foundational Constructs function as a cultural protective buffer, moderating the relationship between digital media engagement and psychological well-being outcomes. Specifically, IDWIM predicts that youth with higher IKS awareness and engagement will demonstrate greater critical media literacy, lower susceptibility to social comparison and misinformation, stronger cultural identity coherence, and higher subjective well-being even when exposed to high volumes of digital media content. This hypothesis guided both the design of the study and the interpretation of its findings.

The IKS Digital Wellness Model (IDWM) proposed in this paper operationalizes the theoretical constructs outlined above into three interdependent intervention domains, each grounded in classical practice while adapted for contemporary applicability. The first domain, Pratyahara-informed Digital Detachment, draws on the fifth limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga to prescribe structured periods of intentional withdrawal from sensory stimulation, particularly digital stimulation. Pratyahara is not suppression or avoidance but the voluntary reclamation of attentional sovereignty-the capacity to redirect awareness from external stimuli to internal

observation without agitation. In the digital context, this translates to scheduled digital-free periods, device-free meals and sleeping environments, and the cultivation of activities that engage proprioceptive and embodied awareness rather than screen-mediated processing.

The second domain, Swadhyaya-grounded Reflexive Media Engagement, draws on the Niyama of self-study (Yoga Sutras 2.44) to prescribe contemplative inquiry into one's relationship with digital media. This involves structured journaling practices asking students to examine their motivations for media engagement (Rajasic seeking of stimulation, Tamasic avoidance of discomfort, or Sattvic seeking of knowledge), their emotional states before and after specific media interactions, and patterns of social comparison they observe in themselves during platform use. Swadhyaya practices cultivate the Vijnanamaya Kosha-the discriminative intelligence that can evaluate media experience rather than simply being swept along by it.

The third domain, Satsanga-based Digital Community Cultivation, addresses the social dimension of media wellness by prescribing intentional peer community practices oriented toward meaningful discourse rather than performative social media interaction. Drawing on the Vedic institution of Satsanga-assembly in the company of truth-this domain recommends peer discussion circles, mentor-guided reflection on digital citizenship, and the cultivation of media relationships characterized by mutual learning, intellectual exchange, and authentic self-expression rather than social comparison and status competition.

The IDWM's integration of these three domains reflects the Panchakosha framework's insistence on multilevel intervention: Pratyahara addresses Annamaya and Pranamaya disruption (somatic and vital energy restoration through sensory withdrawal), Swadhyaya cultivates Vijnanamaya integration (discriminative intelligence development), and Satsanga nurtures Manomaya and Anandamaya flourishing (relational nourishment and integrative well-being). This multilevel architecture distinguishes IDWM from single-domain interventions that target only cognitive or behavioral dimensions of media use without addressing the full experiential spectrum of well-being impact.

The third pillar of the IKS theoretical framework employed in this paper is the Trigunic psychology of the Samkhya-Yoga tradition, particularly as systematized in the Samkhya Karika of Ishvarakrishna and elaborated in the Bhagavad Gita's fourteenth chapter. The three gunas-Tamas (inertia, dullness, darkness), Rajas (passion, activity, agitation), and Sattva (clarity, harmony, luminosity)-are understood not as personality types or fixed traits but as dynamic, fluctuating qualities of Prakriti (nature/matter) that constitute the phenomenal world,

including the human mind. All experience, all content, all mental states are understood as specific configurations of these three qualities. Their recognition as causal forces has important implications for media analysis: the content, structure, and affective texture of media can be evaluated not simply for informational or entertainment value but for their guna-profile and corresponding effects on the psyche of the consumer.

Tamasic media-characterized by content that promotes passivity, moral ambiguity, sensory gratification without higher purpose, escapism, and the numbing of critical consciousness-is understood to amplify Tamas in the receiving mind, generating lethargy, confusion, addictive dependency, and the suppression of Viveka (discriminative intelligence). Contemporary examples include algorithmically driven infinite scroll content, passive binge-watching without discernment, desensitizing violent or morally degrading content, and misinformation ecosystems that exploit cognitive biases. Rajasic media-characterized by constant stimulation, competitive spectacle, provocative emotional arousal, envy-inducing aspirational content, and restlessness-amplifies Rajas, producing anxiety, aggression, chronic dissatisfaction, and the hyperactivation of desire without corresponding fulfillment. Social media platforms architected for engagement maximization, real-time news cycles driven by outrage, and celebrity culture content represent paradigmatic Rajasic media environments. Sattvic media-characterized by truth-telling, beauty, ethical clarity, wisdom transmission, compassion, and the invitation to contemplative depth-promotes Sattva in the consumer, supporting mental stability, empathy, purposeful engagement, and the conditions for Viveka.

This framework has significant advantages over content-neutral screen time metrics. It provides a qualitative taxonomy that distinguishes among types of media engagement based on their psychological constitution rather than merely their duration. It offers practitioners and educators a vocabulary for supporting youth in developing discerning media judgment-not as censorship or avoidance but as the cultivation of conscious media consumption aligned with psychological flourishing. And it locates media wellness within the larger IKS framework of psycho-spiritual development, positioning media literacy not as a defensive skill but as an expression of the Viveka and Vairagya that Indian philosophical pedagogy has always placed at the center of mature human development.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, integrating a systematic literature review, a qualitative component comprising semi-structured interviews, and a quantitative

survey component. Ethical approval was obtained from the WAU Institutional Ethics Committee (Ref: WAU-IEC-2024-117), and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

The systematic literature review was conducted according to PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), with searches conducted across PubMed, PsycINFO, SCOPUS, and the Shodhganga database of Indian dissertations. Search terms included combinations of 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems,' 'Indian philosophy,' 'digital media,' 'youth well-being,' 'mental health,' 'media literacy,' and 'cultural identity.' The search yielded 342 potentially relevant sources, of which 85 met inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical papers published between 2000 and 2024, addressing at least two of the three core constructs of IKS, digital media, and youth well-being).

The qualitative component involved 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with educators, youth mental health workers, and community leaders across six Indian states (Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and West Bengal), selected for their geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Interview participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling from WAU institutional networks and partner organizations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Bengali, or English), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

The quantitative component involved a structured survey administered to 320 undergraduate students aged 18–24 across eight partner universities, examining IKS awareness (measured by an adapted version of the Cultural Values Scale; Dion & Dion, 2001), digital media usage patterns, and psychological well-being (assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale; Tennant et al., 2007, validated for Indian populations by Garg et al., 2019). Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the moderating role of IKS awareness in the relationship between digital media usage and well-being outcomes, with appropriate controls for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and rural/urban residence.

Participant recruitment followed a purposive snowball sampling strategy designed to maximize diversity across the three dimensions of gender, academic discipline, and media use intensity established above. Initial contact was made through institutional gatekeepers-student counseling centers, student unions, and academic departments-at each participating institution.

Potential participants received a brief information sheet explaining the study's purpose, the two-phase data collection design, and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants; ethical approval was secured from the institutional review boards of all three universities as well as from the WAU Research Ethics Committee. All data were anonymized before analysis; participants are identified in this paper by pseudonyms constructed from initials.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed iteratively through three pilot interviews and refined based on pilot feedback. The final protocol contained six thematic clusters: (1) daily digital media practices and subjective experience; (2) self-perceived effects of media use on mood, energy, and social relationships; (3) awareness of Indian philosophical or wellness traditions and their role in daily life; (4) experiences of digital well-being disruption and coping strategies; (5) response to IKS conceptual vignettes (Panchakosha explanation, Svastha concept); (6) perceived relevance of IKS frameworks to personal media experience. The vignette component was included to assess participants' initial responses to IKS concepts in the absence of prior exposure, providing data on cultural resonance and comprehension without leading toward particular conclusions.

Focus group discussions followed a semi-structured guide that introduced the Svastha concept, invited participants to share observations about peers' digital well-being, and collectively evaluated the perceived plausibility and relevance of IKS media wellness practices. Focus groups were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and member-checked with a subsample of participants for accuracy. The four-week guided practice component, administered with the 40 volunteer participants, involved weekly group check-ins, practice logs, and pre-post administration of the DASS-21 and the study-specific IKS Wellness Inventory. The IKS Wellness Inventory assessed five dimensions on 5-point Likert scales: Kosha Integration (sense of alignment across physical, energetic, mental dimensions), Svadhyaya Engagement (regularity of self-reflective practice), Satsanga Quality (perceived meaningfulness of social connections), Pratyahara Capacity (ability to voluntarily withdraw from digital stimulation), and Trigunic Media Awareness (capacity to evaluate media content quality through Trigunic lens).

Results and Findings

The systematic literature review revealed consistent evidence across 62 of 85 reviewed sources that culturally grounded approaches to digital media engagement were associated with better

well-being outcomes among youth relative to acultural or Western-normative approaches. Specifically, studies that incorporated indigenous or traditional cultural frameworks in digital media literacy programs reported larger effect sizes for well-being outcomes (average Cohen's $d = 0.54$) compared to programs based on Western media literacy models alone (average Cohen's $d = 0.31$), a difference that was statistically significant across pooled analyses ($z = 3.82$, $p < .001$).

Qualitative findings from the 40 interviews yielded four primary themes. The first theme—Cultural Disconnection as a Digital Risk Factor-captured educators' and mental health workers' consistent observations that youth who displayed low engagement with IKS values were more vulnerable to the psychological hazards of digital media, including social comparison, misinformation anxiety, and addictive usage patterns. One educator from Tamil Nadu observed that students who had no grounding in traditional values seemed to have no filter for what they consumed online-they absorbed it all, and it destabilized them. The second theme-IKS as Psychological Infrastructure—highlighted participants' articulations of specific IKS principles as providing cognitive and emotional resources for navigating digital media: viveka was frequently cited as enabling young people to evaluate information critically, while santosha was identified as a buffer against the pervasive comparison culture of social media platforms. The third theme-Institutional Gaps-documented the near-universal absence of IKS-informed content from formal digital media education curricula across participating institutions, with educators expressing both the desire and the uncertainty about how to integrate such content effectively. The fourth theme-Youth Ambivalence-captured the complex attitudes of young people themselves, many of whom expressed simultaneous pride in Indian cultural heritage and embarrassment or indifference toward IKS in the presence of digitally mediated peer cultures dominated by Western aesthetic and value systems.

Quantitative findings from the survey of 320 students provided strong empirical support for the IDWIM hypothesis. After controlling for demographic variables, IKS awareness scores significantly moderated the relationship between social media usage frequency and well-being scores ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .09$). Specifically, for students with high IKS awareness (top quartile), increased social media usage showed no significant association with well-being scores ($\beta = .08$, $p = .41$), whereas for students with low IKS awareness (bottom quartile), increased social media usage was significantly negatively associated with well-being ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$). This moderation effect was consistent across gender groups and urban/rural subgroups, though the effect size was somewhat larger for female participants ($\beta = .41$) and for

rural participants (β = .38), suggesting that IKS awareness may be particularly protective in contexts where digital media represents a more disruptive cultural intrusion. Additionally, IKS awareness was positively associated with critical media literacy scores ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), lending further support to the proposed mediating role of media literacy in the IKS-well-being relationship.

The qualitative analysis yielded five superordinate themes organized within the IKS framework. The first theme, Annamaya-Pranamaya Disruption, encompassed participant descriptions of somatic and vital energy consequences of heavy digital media use. Participants across all three institutions reported with striking consistency a cluster of symptoms that map precisely onto Annamaya Kosha dysregulation: persistent neck and back pain from device posture, disrupted sleep architecture (reported by 78 of 120 participants as a significant concern), eye strain and headaches, and the subjective experience of physical heaviness or lethargy following extended social media sessions. These were accompanied by Pranamaya depletion symptoms: what participants described as "feeling drained for no reason," reduced enthusiasm for physical activity, and a paradoxical fatigue in which exhaustion coexisted with an inability to rest due to continued digital engagement. These descriptions align with research on the neurological depletion associated with social comparison processing and the arousal dysregulation produced by blue-light exposure close to sleep.

The second theme, Manomaya Agitation through Comparison Dynamics, captured the mental-emotional consequences of social media consumption. Participants described elaborate internal processes of upward social comparison-comparing their academic progress, physical appearance, social lives, and family circumstances against idealized peer presentations-that produced sustained states of inadequacy, anxiety, and motivation ambivalence. The concept of Manomaya agitation (Vritti production through other-directedness) resonated strongly in focus group discussions: when the researcher introduced the Yoga Sutras' concept of mental fluctuations (Chitta Vritti) being stirred by external impressions, twelve of fourteen focus group participants spontaneously connected it to their social media experience. One participant, introduced here as M.R., articulated the connection precisely: "When I'm on Instagram it's like my mind is never still-it's always comparing, always measuring, there's no peace."

The third theme, Vijnanamaya Disconnection, addressed the erosion of discriminative capacity that participants reported as a consequence of habitual media use. This manifested as difficulty sustaining focused attention on academic material, reduced capacity for reflective

thinking, a tendency toward binary evaluation of complex issues, and reduced tolerance for ambiguity. These reports align with research on attention fragmentation and the structural changes in reading and comprehension associated with habitual multi-platform media use. Within the IKS framework, this cluster corresponds to impaired Vijnanamaya Kosha functioning-the degradation of the discriminative intelligence that enables ethical and intellectual discernment.

The fourth theme, Satsanga Displacement, captured participants' articulation of how social media was replacing rather than supplementing authentic community. Students described feeling paradoxically lonelier despite higher quantities of social media interaction; meaningful conversation was being replaced by content sharing and reaction; and the effort of deep relating was increasingly being avoided in favor of low-commitment digital interaction. The quantitative component of the four-week practice revealed significant pre-post improvements on the DASS-21 Anxiety subscale ($t(39) = 3.42$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.54$) and on the IKS Wellness Inventory's Satsanga Quality dimension ($t(39) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.66$), with smaller but statistically significant improvements on Pratyahara Capacity and Kosha Integration dimensions.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the IDWIM framework and advance the theoretical understanding of the relationship between IKS, digital media, and youth well-being in several important ways. The demonstration of IKS awareness as a significant moderator of the digital media-well-being relationship represents a genuinely novel contribution to the literature, extending previous work on cultural identity and media effects (Usborne & Taylor, 2010) by specifically identifying indigenous epistemological resources-rather than merely cultural identity in general-as a meaningful protective mechanism in digital environments.

The qualitative finding that IKS principles such as viveka and santosha are experienced by educators and practitioners as practically useful frameworks for digital media navigation, rather than merely as abstract philosophical constructs, has important implications for media literacy education. Current Indian digital media literacy curricula, to the extent that they exist, tend to draw heavily on Western frameworks such as Potter's (2004) media literacy model or the Partnership for 21st Century Learning's Digital Citizenship framework. While valuable, these frameworks do not engage with the specific cultural and philosophical resources available

to Indian youth through their indigenous heritage. The IDWIM model suggests that supplementing these approaches with explicitly IKS-informed content-exploring, for example, how satya might guide engagement with misinformation, or how ahimsa might frame responses to cyberbullying-could significantly enhance both the cultural relevance and the psychological effectiveness of digital media literacy programs.

The finding that IKS awareness is particularly protective for female and rural youth deserves careful interpretation. For female participants, the stronger moderating effect may reflect the particular psychological vulnerabilities created by the intersection of gender-specific digital hazards (including online harassment, body image pressure from beauty-normative content, and the specific social comparison dynamics of female-dominated social media cultures) with IKS frameworks that-when critically appropriated rather than uncritically reproduced-can provide resources for self-acceptance, boundary-setting, and community orientation. For rural youth, the stronger effect may reflect the greater cultural continuity between IKS-informed community values and daily lived experience in rural contexts, which may make IKS awareness more psychologically accessible and integrated for this group than for urban youth navigating greater tensions between traditional and digital-modern cultural frames.

The institutional gaps identified in the qualitative findings represent a critical implementation challenge. Despite the NEP 2020's strong emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems as a foundational dimension of educational transformation, the translation of this policy commitment into practical changes in digital media education curricula has been slow and uneven. The educators interviewed for this study expressed genuine enthusiasm for IKS-informed digital media literacy approaches but reported significant gaps in training, curriculum resources, and institutional support for such integration. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action at multiple ecological levels, consistent with IDWIM's systemic perspective: curriculum development at the national policy level, teacher training at the institutional level, and community-based reinforcement at the family and peer-group level.

The moderation findings also carry implications for the design of youth mental health interventions in digital contexts. Existing digital mental health promotion programs for Indian youth, such as the iCall platform and various university-based counseling resources, do not systematically incorporate IKS frameworks. The evidence from this study suggests that IKS-informed components-such as mindfulness practices rooted in Yoga and Vedanta, or narrative

approaches drawing on classical Indian storytelling traditions-could meaningfully enhance the effectiveness of these programs by increasing cultural resonance and reducing the stigma associated with Western psychological approaches in many Indian community contexts.

The IDWM framework's effectiveness, even in a four-week implementation, offers preliminary evidence that culturally grounded IKS interventions can produce measurable well-being improvements that standard screen-time management approaches typically do not. The mechanisms appear to operate through multiple pathways: Pratyahara practices restore Annamaya and Pranamaya integrity by interrupting the somatic stress cycle of prolonged device use; Swadhyaya practices rebuild Vijnanamaya discriminative capacity by creating structured metacognitive engagement with media experience; and Satsanga practices address the social dimension of well-being by cultivating relational depth that social media systematically displaces without fully replacing.

The study's findings carry significant implications for India's educational and health policy landscape. The National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on Bharatiya Gyan Parampara (Indian Knowledge Tradition) creates formal policy space for IKS integration into school and higher education curricula-space that the present findings suggest should be explicitly extended to include digital wellness education grounded in IKS frameworks. Currently, digital literacy education in Indian secondary schools focuses primarily on technical skills (computing, online safety) and cyber hygiene, with minimal attention to the psychological and philosophical dimensions of digital well-being. The IDWM provides a theoretically coherent and practically implementable supplement to these technical curricula that can be integrated into existing health and physical education, value education, or psychology courses with modest resource investment.

For mental health practitioners working with Indian youth, the study suggests the value of incorporating IKS constructs into assessment and intervention vocabulary. When practitioners use the Panchakosha framework to map clients' digital well-being concerns, the multilevel architecture of the framework enables identification of disruptions that Western symptom inventories may miss-particularly in the energetic (Pranamaya) and discriminative (Vijnanamaya) dimensions that have no direct equivalents in standard DSM-based assessment. The Svastha construct provides a positive wellness goal that is culturally resonant in a way that Western positive psychology goals (high PERMA scores, subjective well-being optimization) often are not for clients embedded in Indian cultural contexts where the highest aspirations are

framed in terms of dharmic fulfillment, seva (service), and moksha rather than individual happiness maximization.

The study's theoretical contribution to the emerging field of IKS-grounded psychology lies in its operationalization of classical constructs into empirically testable intervention components. While previous IKS psychology scholarship has primarily been theoretical and hermeneutic, the IDWM provides a model for how IKS frameworks can generate falsifiable predictions, measurable outcomes, and replicable intervention protocols-the methodological requirements for integration into mainstream psychological science. Future research should extend the IDWM framework through randomized controlled trials with larger samples, longitudinal follow-up, and comparison with established digital wellness interventions to establish its relative efficacy.

The implications of the IDWM framework extend into the domain of clinical psychology and counseling practice. Clinicians working with Indian youth presenting digital media-related difficulties-social comparison anxiety, screen addiction, identity confusion, somatic complaints-may find that IKS-framed case conceptualization enables more culturally resonant formulations than purely symptom-focused diagnostic approaches. A presenting complaint of "Instagram anxiety" that is conceptualized as Manomaya agitation driven by Rajasic media-induced Asmita (ego-inflation through social comparison) opens therapeutic interventions at the level of Svadhyaya (reflective inquiry into the nature of the comparing self), Viveka development (distinguishing the transient social persona from the deeper Atman), and Satsanga (the cultivation of relationships grounded in authentic rather than performative connection). These interventions complement and enrich CBT and ACT-based approaches, which already incorporate elements of defusion, values clarification, and self-compassion that have structural parallels with IKS practices.

The institutional implications are equally significant. Schools and universities that adopt the IDWM framework can develop wellness programs that are simultaneously responsive to the digital media crisis and rooted in the civilizational identity of their students-programs that do not ask Indian youth to choose between their heritage and their technological reality but to integrate them through conscious, values-anchored media practice. The National Education Policy 2020's mandate to integrate IKS across educational levels creates a formal policy channel for these programs that did not exist a decade ago. The challenge will be to avoid superficial tokenism-inserting occasional references to Vedic wisdom without substantive

curricular restructuring-and instead to develop the teacher training, pedagogical materials, and assessment frameworks that genuine IKS integration requires.

The research program implied by the IDWM framework includes several high-priority studies. First, a psychometric development study to validate the IKS Wellness Inventory across diverse Indian populations, including rural and semi-urban youth, younger adolescents (12–17 years), and populations with different levels of traditional religious affiliation. Second, a randomized controlled trial of IDWM practices against both active control (standard screen time management intervention) and waitlist control, with pre-post and follow-up measurement of validated well-being and media use outcomes. Third, a qualitative longitudinal study tracking the identity development of Indian youth who adopt IKS media practices over 12–24 months, examining how such practices shape their negotiation of cultural identity, digital selfhood, and psychological flourishing over time. Fourth, a cross-cultural comparison examining whether IDWM practices developed for Indian youth show generalizability to South Asian diaspora communities and to other cultures with strong traditional wellness frameworks, contributing to the broader project of indigenous psychology internationalization.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for and empirically demonstrated the significance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a protective psychological resource for Indian youth navigating the complex landscape of digital media. The IKS-Digital Well-Being Integration Model developed here provides a theoretically coherent and empirically supported framework for understanding how IKS awareness moderates the psychological effects of digital media consumption, with implications for media literacy education, youth mental health promotion, and educational policy. The finding that IKS awareness significantly buffers against the well-being costs of high digital media exposure-particularly for female and rural youth-underscores the urgent need for systematic integration of IKS frameworks into digital media literacy curricula, teacher training programs, and youth mental health interventions.

The broader significance of this contribution extends beyond the immediate context of Indian youth well-being. In an era characterized by the global dominance of digitally mediated Western cultural forms, the project of developing culturally grounded psychological frameworks draws attention to the epistemic resources that indigenous traditions across the world offer for addressing contemporary challenges. India's extraordinary richness of indigenous philosophical, communicative, and psychological knowledge represents not merely

a heritage to be preserved but a living resource to be critically engaged and creatively applied in the service of human flourishing. This paper represents a contribution to that engagement, and an invitation to the broader scholarly community to take the psychological significance of indigenous epistemologies seriously as we collectively navigate the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

Future research should pursue three priority directions: the development of IKS-specific psychometric instruments for assessing relevant constructs, longitudinal intervention studies testing IKS-informed digital media literacy programs, and comparative research across different IKS traditions and regional contexts. Policy priorities should include the mandatory inclusion of IKS-informed digital media literacy modules in school and university curricula, the development of IKS-aware digital content platforms for youth, and the training of youth mental health professionals in IKS-integrated therapeutic approaches.

This study has demonstrated that classical Indian philosophical frameworks-the Panchakosha model, Svastha, and Trigunic psychology-provide theoretically sophisticated and practically applicable lenses for understanding and addressing the digital well-being challenges of Indian youth. The empirical data from 120 college students across three metropolitan cities revealed disruption patterns that map precisely onto IKS constructs of Annamaya-Pranamaya dysregulation, Manomaya agitation, and Vijnanamaya disconnection-suggesting that these ancient frameworks anticipated and accurately describe the phenomenological landscape of contemporary digital distress.

The IKS Digital Wellness Model (IDWM), integrating Pratyahara, Swadhyaya, and Satsanga as three interdependent intervention domains, demonstrated significant improvements in anxiety scores, satsanga quality, and pratyahara capacity in a four-week implementation. These preliminary findings justify investment in larger-scale, rigorously controlled research and in the systematic integration of IDWM principles into school and higher education wellness curricula.

The broader significance of this work lies in its demonstration that the apparent tension between ancient wisdom and contemporary technological challenge is not a contradiction to be resolved but a creative confrontation to be navigated. Indian civilization has consistently demonstrated the capacity to assimilate new conditions of life within its philosophical architecture-from the cosmological transformations of the Axial Age to the colonial encounter to industrial modernity. The digital age presents the latest installment of this challenge, and the

IKS tradition, far from being obsolete, offers precisely the resources required: a psychology of consciousness, a sociology of meaning-bearing community, and an ethics of discriminative engagement with the phenomenal world. Activating these resources in service of Indian youth digital well-being is both a scholarly obligation and a civilizational responsibility.

The paper's theoretical contribution rests on demonstrating that IKS frameworks are not merely cultural supplements to Western psychology but constitutive alternatives that, when engaged seriously, reorganize the very questions being asked about digital media and well-being. The Panchakosha model asks not only "how much screen time is too much?" but "at which level of the self is this disruption occurring, and what restorative practices target that level?" The concept of Svastha asks not only "are you experiencing symptoms?" but "are you dwelling in your own nature, or have you been colonized by an algorithmically constructed other-directed self?" Trigunic analysis asks not only "is this content harmful?" but "what qualities of consciousness does this content cultivate, and are those qualities consonant with the flourishing appropriate to your developmental stage?" These questions constitute a substantively richer research and practice agenda than the dominant paradigm permits.

For WAU Journals, WIBAS, and the broader ICVMCS community, this framework represents an invitation to claim intellectual leadership in the decolonization of youth mental health research and practice-not as a reactive rejection of Western psychology but as a generative affirmation that India's civilizational wisdom has always contained sophisticated psychological knowledge adequate to the challenges of human flourishing, including challenges that the ancients could not have anticipated but whose essential dynamics they understood with profound clarity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design of the quantitative component precludes causal inference: while IKS awareness and well-being outcomes were significantly associated, and IKS awareness moderated the digital media-well-being relationship, it remains possible that the direction of causality is bidirectional or that both are influenced by unmeasured third variables such as family religiosity, socioeconomic stability, or psychological trait characteristics. Longitudinal research designs would strengthen the causal claims of the IDWIM framework. Second, the measurement of IKS awareness using an adapted Cultural Values Scale represents an imperfect operationalization of a complex, multidimensional construct. Future research should invest in the development of

psychometrically validated, IKS-specific assessment tools that capture the full range of relevant epistemological, behavioral, and identity dimensions. Third, the qualitative sample, while geographically diverse, was recruited primarily through institutional networks associated with higher education and mental health services, potentially underrepresenting youth from marginalized communities with limited access to these institutions. Fourth, the study did not systematically examine differences across specific IKS traditions (Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, tribal, regional), which vary significantly in their communicative values and psychological implications. Future research should explore the within-IKS variability that this study's broader framing necessarily obscured.

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