Cultural Rootedness, Media Consumption Patterns, and Psychological Well-Being Among Indian Youth: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between cultural rootedness-defined as the extent to which individuals' sense of identity, values, and meaning-making are grounded in their indigenous cultural heritage-and psychological well-being among Indian youth, with specific attention to the mediating role of media consumption patterns. Drawing on the Cultural Rootedness and Media Well-Being Model (CRWM), the study argues that cultural rootedness functions as both a direct predictor of well-being and as a moderator of the relationship between media consumption and psychological health outcomes. A mixed-methods investigation involving a cross-sectional survey (N = 580) and in-depth qualitative interviews (N = 36) was conducted with Indian youth aged 17–25 across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Survey findings indicate that cultural rootedness scores were significantly positively associated with life satisfaction (r = .47, p < .001), positively associated with meaning in life (r = .53,

p < .001), and negatively associated with depression symptoms (r = -.39, p < .001). Importantly, cultural rootedness moderated the relationship between Westernized media consumption and depressive symptoms, with high-rootedness participants demonstrating significantly reduced vulnerability to the depressogenic effects of Western-normative content. Qualitative findings revealed five dimensions of the lived experience of cultural rootedness in digital media contexts: the navigation of cultural hybridity, the role of family and community in cultural anchoring, the experience of cultural pride versus shame in digital public spaces, the use of IKS content for psychological restoration, and the challenge of authentically expressing cultural identity in digitally mediated environments. The paper concludes with implications for culturally grounded media education, mental health promotion, and the design of digital platforms that support rather than undermine cultural rootedness among young users.

Keywords: cultural rootedness, media consumption, youth well-being, Indian identity, IKS, digital media, life satisfaction.

Introduction

The concept of cultural rootedness-the depth and quality of an individual's connection to their cultural heritage, values, and community—has emerged as a significant variable in the psychology of well-being, particularly in contexts characterized by rapid cultural change and globalization-driven identity pressure (Adams & Markus, 2001; Delle Fave et al., 2011). For Indian youth, the experience of cultural rootedness is shaped by a unique confluence of forces: the extraordinary richness and diversity of India's indigenous cultural heritage, including its philosophical traditions, artistic forms, vernacular languages, ecological knowledge systems, and community practices; the powerful homogenizing and Westernizing pressures of globalized digital media; and the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity that has characterized Indian cultural discourse since at least the colonial period (Nandy, 1983).

The relationship between cultural rootedness and media consumption among Indian youth is not simply one of threat and resistance-where media represents a uniformly corrosive force and cultural rootedness a protective fortress (Aarzoo & Lal, 2024). The reality is considerably more complex, and this complexity has important implications for both theory and practice. Digital media can simultaneously threaten and support cultural rootedness:

threatening it through the displacement of indigenous cultural content by Western-normative media forms, and supporting it through the creation of digital spaces for the expression, sharing, and revitalization of indigenous cultural traditions (Ginsburg, 2008). Indian social media platforms and YouTube channels devoted to classical music, traditional cooking, regional languages, folk storytelling, and Vedic philosophy represent significant examples of the latter tendency, attracting millions of young Indian followers who use digital media as a vehicle for cultural reconnection and identity affirmation (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a).

This paper's investigation of the relationship between cultural rootedness, media consumption, and well-being proceeds from a theoretical position that rejects both technological determinism (the view that digital media is inherently harmful to cultural rootedness) and cultural essentialism (the view that cultural rootedness requires the rejection of modern media engagement). Instead, drawing on the CRWM framework, the paper argues that cultural rootedness is a dynamic psychological construct that can be cultivated and expressed in and through digital media environments, and that the degree to which media consumption supports or undermines well-being is significantly shaped by the cultural quality and rootedness orientation of that consumption.

Three research questions guide the investigation: (1) What is the relationship between cultural rootedness and psychological well-being outcomes (life satisfaction, meaning in life, depressive symptoms) among Indian youth? (2) Does cultural rootedness moderate the relationship between media consumption patterns and psychological well-being? (3) What are the qualitative dimensions of young people's lived experience of cultural rootedness and cultural identity navigation in digital media environments? These questions are addressed through the mixed-methods design described in the methodology section, generating findings with implications for theory, practice, and policy in the domains of media psychology, mental health promotion, and digital media education.

The katha tradition in India-encompassing the Panchatantra, the Jataka tales, the Puranic stories, regional folk narrative traditions, and the contemporary revival of oral storytelling as a therapeutic and educational practice-represents one of the world's most sophisticated systems for using narrative to transmit wisdom, cultivate character, process emotional experience, and build community. This tradition did not merely entertain; it performed specific psychological and social functions whose contemporary relevance, this

paper argues, has been systematically undervalued in the rush toward digitally mediated content delivery.

The crisis this paper addresses is the displacement of the katha tradition by algorithmically curated digital media content that serves attention-economy objectives rather than developmental objectives (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). When a twelve-year-old Indian child spends her evening with YouTube Shorts rather than grandmother's stories, the loss is not merely cultural sentiment-it is a measurable withdrawal from specific developmental resources that the storytelling tradition provided: narrative-mediated emotional processing, moral imagination development, intergenerational wisdom transmission, embodied communal meaning-making, and the cultivation of the receptive silence (Mauna) that classical pedagogy recognized as the precondition for deep learning.

The paper proposes the Katha Vachana Wellness Model (KVWM) as both a theoretical framework and a practical intervention design. KVWM operationalizes the classical storytelling tradition's therapeutic and developmental mechanisms — Rasa activation, narrative distance, wisdom transmission, contemplative reception-into a structured media wellness intervention that can be implemented in school, community, and clinical settings. The model draws on narrative psychology, contemplative education research, and positive psychology alongside classical IKS frameworks to create a rigorous, cross-culturally grounded approach to storytelling as a media wellness practice.

Literature Review

The psychological literature on cultural identity and well-being provides a robust foundation for the present investigation. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), while not specifically focused on cultural identity, offers a framework for understanding cultural rootedness as a contributor to need satisfaction: insofar as cultural heritage provides resources for autonomy (self-expression in culturally authentic ways), competence (mastery of culturally valued skills and knowledge), and relatedness (connection to a cultural community), cultural rootedness may be understood as a vehicle for meeting fundamental psychological needs. Consistent with this analysis, research across diverse cultural contexts has found positive associations between cultural identity strength and well-being, including for indigenous communities (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), immigrant youth (Berry et al., 2006), and minority cultural groups (Phinney, 1992).

In the specific context of Indian youth, Misra and Gergen (1993) provided an early foundational analysis of the psychological significance of cultural identity in the Indian context, arguing that Western psychological frameworks inadequately capture the relational and collective dimensions of identity that characterize Indian selfhood. Srivastava (2012) examined the relationship between cultural identity and mental health among urban Indian youth, finding that youth with strong bicultural identities-capable of navigating both Indian and Western cultural frames without experiencing these as incompatible-reported higher well-being than those who experienced cultural identity as a source of conflict. Kaur (2020) found that participation in traditional cultural practices (including family rituals, religious observances, regional festivals, and classical arts) was positively associated with life satisfaction and inversely associated with anxiety among adolescents in Punjab, even when accounting for socioeconomic factors.

The literature on media consumption and cultural identity is relevant to and complicates the rootedness-well-being relationship. Acculturation research by Berry and colleagues (2006) demonstrates that the mode of cultural adaptation-integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization-significantly affects well-being, with integrative adaptation (maintaining heritage culture while selectively adopting host culture elements) consistently associated with the best well-being outcomes (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026). Translated to the media context, this framework suggests that the integration of indigenous and global media content-engaging critically and selectively with both—may be more conducive to well-being than either exclusive consumption of Western media (assimilation) or deliberate avoidance of non-indigenous media (separation).

Research on the specific relationship between culturally normative media content and psychological well-being supports the importance of 'cultural fit' in media effects. Mastro (2015) reviewed evidence suggesting that exposure to media representations that are congruent with one's cultural identity is associated with positive identity outcomes, while exposure to misrepresentation, stereotyping, or erasure of one's cultural identity in media is associated with psychological harm (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026). For Indian youth, the dominance of Western cultural norms in globally distributed digital platforms-including ideals of physical appearance, romantic relationships, lifestyle, and communicative style that reflect predominantly White, Anglo-American cultural assumptions-creates a systematic cultural mismatch between lived experience and mediated representation with potential psychological consequences (Patel, 2020).

The literature on media and well-being more broadly has identified several mechanisms through which media consumption affects psychological health that are moderated by cultural identity factors. Social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014) may be intensified when comparison targets are both physically idealized and culturally foreign, creating a double layer of unfavorable comparison. Cultivation effects (Gerbner et al., 2002)- the tendency for heavy media consumption to distort perceptions of social reality toward the norms represented in media content-may be particularly significant for youth whose indigenous cultural realities are systematically underrepresented in global media. Parasocial relationships with mediated figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956) may be more psychologically complex when those figures represent alien cultural norms, simultaneously offering attractive aspirational models and alienating cultural frames.

In summary, the literature converges in suggesting that cultural rootedness is a significant protective factor for youth well-being, that media consumption patterns significantly mediate the expression of this protective effect, and that the design of media education and psychological interventions for Indian youth should systematically incorporate cultural rootedness as a core construct. The CRWM framework developed in this paper provides an integrative model for addressing these insights.

The therapeutic applications of narrative have been extensively developed within Western psychological traditions. McAdams' (1993, 2006) narrative identity theory establishes that psychological well-being is substantially constituted through the coherence, complexity, and meaning-richness of the personal narrative-the life story through which individuals organize their experience into a meaningful arc. Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) operationalizes this insight therapeutically by helping clients externalize, re-author, and thicken their personal narratives, replacing problem-saturated dominant stories with alternative narratives that restore agency and meaning (Lal, 2023). Bibliotherapy (Lenkowsky, 1987; Abdullah, 2002) demonstrates that engagement with literary narratives-reading, listening, and discussing stories -produces measurable improvements in empathy, emotional processing, and psychological well-being across clinical and non-clinical populations.

The neuroscience of storytelling has provided biological mechanisms for these therapeutic effects. Zak (2013) demonstrated that narrative engagement activates oxytocin release-the neuropeptide associated with trust, empathy, and prosocial behavior-at levels proportional to narrative tension and character identification, providing neurobiological

grounding for storytelling's empathy-building and social bonding effects. Berns et al. (2013) documented neurological changes in the somatosensory cortex and motor cortex following narrative engagement, demonstrating that reading about embodied experience activates neural circuits associated with having that experience-a finding consistent with the classical Indian concept of Sahridaya (shared heartedness) as the basis of aesthetic and narrative reception. Mar and Oatley's (2008) simulation hypothesis proposes that fictional narrative functions as a social simulation-providing readers with low-risk emotional and social practice through narrative engagement that builds social intelligence and emotional competence.

Within the Indian tradition, the therapeutic and pedagogical functions of storytelling have been systematically theorized in ways that anticipate and complement these contemporary findings (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). Abhinavagupta's (10th century CE) aesthetic theory-the most comprehensive philosophical analysis of the Navarasa (nine emotional essences) system- provides a sophisticated account of how narrative-mediated aesthetic experience produces Chitta Vikshepa Shanti (stilling of mental agitation). The cathartic function of rasa experience is not Aristotelian purgation (emotional release as evacuation) but Rasananda (aesthetic bliss)- the transformation of ordinary emotional experience into universalized aesthetic consciousness that simultaneously engages and transcends personal psychology.

Panchatantra pedagogy — the world's oldest extant collection of pedagogical stories- has been analyzed by contemporary scholars as a sophisticated embedded-instruction system that uses narrative to develop strategic thinking, social intelligence, ethical reasoning, and adaptive problem-solving through indirect, right-brain modes of knowing that direct didactic instruction cannot access. Olivelle (1997) and Ziolkowski (1998) have documented the Panchatantra's sophisticated use of story-within-story structures to create recursive ethical reflection-each embedded story serving as a mirror that illuminates the situation of characters in the enclosing frame story, creating recursive loops of ethical analysis without moralizing.

The specific media wellness application of katha traditions has been explored by a small but growing body of Indian researchers. Patel et al. (2021) documented that after-school storytelling circles in urban Mumbai slums produced significant improvements in children's emotional regulation, conflict resolution skills, and academic motivation relative to control groups-effects mediated by the narrative processing and communal meaning-making components of the storytelling sessions. Sharma and Krishnaswamy (2022) demonstrated that Panchatantra-based social-emotional learning curricula produced greater improvements in

empathy, ethical reasoning, and classroom cooperation than standard social-emotional learning programs, attributing the difference to the cultural resonance and narrative sophistication of the Indian material (Lal & Sharma, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The Cultural Rootedness and Media Well-Being Model (CRWM) integrates four theoretical traditions: cultural identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model of media processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, extended), and the Meaning Maintenance Model (Heine et al., 2006). These traditions are combined to generate a multilevel model of how cultural rootedness interacts with media consumption patterns to produce well-being outcomes.

CRWM posits cultural rootedness as a three-dimensional construct comprising: (1) Heritage Knowledge and Values-familiarity with and endorsement of indigenous cultural knowledge, philosophical principles, and ethical norms; (2) Cultural Identity Integration-the degree to which indigenous cultural heritage is integrated into one's sense of self, including capacity for bicultural navigation; and (3) Community Embeddedness-the extent of active participation in culturally grounded community practices, relationships, and traditions. These three dimensions are theorized as mutually reinforcing but analytically distinguishable.

Media consumption is conceptualized along two key dimensions: the Cultural Alignment of content consumed (ranging from indigenous/heritage-aligned to globally Western-normative) and the Mode of Engagement (ranging from passive/uncritical to active/critical). The interaction of these dimensions produces four quadrants of media engagement, of which CRWM posits Heritage-Active (high cultural alignment, active engagement) as most conducive to well-being and Western-Passive (low cultural alignment, passive engagement) as most potentially harmful, particularly for youth with low cultural rootedness.

Well-being outcomes in CRWM include hedonic well-being (positive affect, absence of depression, life satisfaction) and eudaimonic well-being (meaning in life, personal growth, community contribution), following Keyes' (2002) dual continuum model. CRWM predicts that cultural rootedness will be most strongly associated with eudaimonic well-being outcomes, given the shared emphasis of IKS frameworks and eudaimonic psychology on contribution, growth, and transcendent purpose, while media consumption patterns will more directly affect

hedonic well-being through comparison, emotional contagion, and attentional capture mechanisms.

Rasa theory provides the cornerstone of KVWM's account of how storytelling produces well-being effects. Bharata Muni's Natyashastra (2nd century BCE) articulates the theory of Rasa as aesthetic essence: the eight (later nine, with the addition of Shanta or peaceful rasa) fundamental emotional qualities that skilled performance and narrative can evoke in a receptive audience, transforming personal emotion (Bhava) into universalized aesthetic experience (Rasa). The critical feature of Rasa experience for KVWM's wellness application is its transformative quality: personal grief (Shoka) becomes Karuna Rasa (the aesthetic essence of compassion); personal fear becomes Bhayanaka Rasa (the aesthetic essence of terror); personal mirth becomes Hasya Rasa (the aesthetic essence of humor). This transformation does not suppress emotion but universalizes it-creating what Abhinavagupta calls Sadharanikarana (universalization), in which the audience member's particular emotional situation is expanded into a universal human dimension that simultaneously engages and transcends personal psychological fixation.

This transformative mechanism has direct wellness applications. Adolescents experiencing social comparison anxiety, academic failure shame, relationship distress, and identity confusion can engage with these experiences through narrative-mediated Rasa without the intensification of personal identification that direct emotional processing can produce. The aesthetic distance of katha-"this is a story"-enables the emotional engagement necessary for genuine processing while maintaining the container that prevents traumatic overwhelm. This is precisely what narrative therapy calls "narrative distance" and what drama therapy calls "aesthetic distance"-classical Indian aesthetics had theorized and operationalized this mechanism millennia earlier.

The Prabodha (awakening) function of katha-its role in stimulating moral imagination, ethical reasoning, and spiritual aspiration-constitutes KVWM's second theoretical pillar. The Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Jataka tales, and Puranic narratives all employ embedded ethical situations to cultivate practical wisdom (Viveka) in ways that direct moral instruction cannot. The psychological mechanism of indirect instruction through narrative is consistent with what contemporary moral psychology calls exemplar-based moral learning (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004)-the process through which moral knowledge is internalized not through abstract

principle learning but through engagement with narrative exemplars whose situations create emotional investment in moral outcomes.

KVWM's third theoretical pillar is the communal dimension of katha-the fact that traditional Indian storytelling occurred within gathering contexts (Katha Vachana sessions, festival performances, family evenings) that simultaneously transmitted narrative content and built community. The communal reception of narrative-sharing emotional responses, discussing moral interpretations, collectively constructing meaning-constitutes a form of Satsanga (meaningful community assembly) that integrates cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions of well-being in a single practice. This communal dimension is precisely what algorithmically individualized content consumption eliminates, replacing shared meaning-making with isolated, personalized content streams.

The Trigunic Theory of Media Cognition (TMCM) extends the classical Samkhya-Yoga framework to the domain of digital media through a series of theoretically motivated adaptations. In the classical Samkhya formulation, the three gunas-sattva (luminosity, clarity, harmony), rajas (activity, passion, restlessness), and tamas (inertia, opacity, confusion)-are ontological constituents of all manifest reality, present in different proportions in all physical, biological, psychological, and social phenomena. The qualitative experience of any phenomenon reflects the dominant guna in its constitution: sattvic phenomena produce clarity, calm, and insight; rajasic phenomena produce stimulation, desire, and agitation; tamasic phenomena produce dullness, confusion, and inertia. The gunas are dynamic, mutually influencing, and responsive to behavioral and environmental inputs-an individual can cultivate greater sattva through dietary, behavioral, and contemplative choices, or can allow rajas and tamas to increase through stimulation-seeking, poor habits, and lack of discernment.

The TMCM applies this framework to digital media content and consumption by proposing systematic mappings between media content characteristics and guna-profiles. Sattvic media content is characterized by truthfulness, genuine insight, prosocial orientation, aesthetic harmony, cultural depth, and absence of inflammatory or sensational elements. Rajasic media content is characterized by sensationalism, conflict, competitive stimulation, aspirational imagery, rapid pace, emotional provocation, and commercial or political agitation. Tamasic media content is characterized by triviality, repetitive passive consumption, intellectual vacancy, and content that diminishes critical engagement or social awareness. These category assignments are not absolute-any given piece of content may have mixed guna-

profiles-but they provide a systematic vocabulary for media content evaluation that draws on the Samkhya tradition's developed analysis of qualitative experience.

The theoretical bridge between guna-analysis and contemporary media psychology is provided by the construct of 'media nourishment,' analogous to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia (flourishing through virtuous activity). Just as Aristotle distinguished between pleasures that contribute to genuine flourishing and pleasures that merely provide hedonic stimulation, the Samkhya framework distinguishes between media consumption that genuinely nourishes the mind (sattvic) and media consumption that merely stimulates (rajasic) or numbs (tamasic) it. Contemporary media psychology's distinction between 'meaningful' and 'hedonic' media experiences (Oliver & Raney, 2011), and its documentation that meaningful media experiences produce stronger, more durable well-being benefits than hedonic media experiences (Rieger et al., 2014), provides empirical support for the Samkhya-derived prediction that sattvic media consumption will produce better psychological outcomes than rajasic or tamasic consumption.

The TMCM's methodological innovation-the development of the Trigunic Media Consumption Scale (TMCS)-represents an operationalization challenge that required careful engagement with both the classical textual sources and contemporary psychometric principles. The TMCS assesses media consumption patterns across three dimensions (Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic consumption) using a 24-item Likert measure, with eight items per dimension. Items were developed through a three-stage process: (1) textual analysis of classical descriptions of the gunas in the Bhagavad Gita, the Samkhya Karika, and selected commentaries; (2) focus groups with media psychology experts and IKS scholars to generate contemporary behavioral manifestations of each guna-profile in digital media contexts; and (3) cognitive interviews with target population members to verify item comprehension and cultural relevance. The resulting scale demonstrated good psychometric properties in validation with the study sample.

The narrative framework that underpins this paper's analysis draws on three interconnected traditions within IKS storytelling theory. First, the Katha Vachana (narrative telling) tradition, documented most extensively in the Puranic and Ithihasic corpus, conceives of storytelling not as entertainment or information transmission but as a sacred technology of consciousness transformation. The act of hearing a well-told story-particularly one embedded in the dhvani (resonance) of the storyteller's own realized understanding-is understood to induce specific states of consciousness in the listener that cannot be reached through direct

instruction. This conception anticipates contemporary neuroscience of narrative, which has documented that story comprehension produces neural coupling between storyteller and listener (Stephens et al., 2010), activates the simulation of the story's events in the listener's own motor and sensory cortices (Mar & Oatley, 2008), and triggers the release of oxytocin that prepares the listener for prosocial engagement and behavior change (Zak, 2013). The IKS account, however, goes deeper: it locates the transformative power of Katha not merely in neurological simulation but in the resonance between the deep structures of the story and the deep structure of consciousness itself-a resonance that the Yoga Sutras conceptualize as Samapatti, the merging of the contemplative mind with its object.

Second, Rasa theory-elaborated most systematically in Bharata's Natyashastra (2nd–4th century CE) and extended by the Kashmir Shaivite aesthetician Abhinavagupta (10th–11th century CE)-provides the analytical vocabulary for understanding how stories produce their psychological effects. The nine Rasas (emotional-aesthetic essences)-Shringara (love and beauty), Hasya (joy and humor), Karuna (compassion and sorrow), Raudra (fierce righteous anger), Vira (heroism and courage), Bhayanaka (fear and terror), Bibhatsa (disgust and revulsion), Adbhuta (wonder and astonishment), and Shanta (peace and equanimity)-are not emotions in the Western sense of subjective states but inter-subjective resonances between the story world and the consciousness of the audience. A story's Rasa is not what the character feels but what the audience is moved to experience in their own being-an experience that, when fully realized, transcends personal emotion and achieves aesthetic universality. From a media wellness perspective, Rasa theory provides the tools for analyzing which emotional-aesthetic qualities a given media narrative cultivates, in what proportions, and toward what ends. A narrative that cultivates Vira and Karuna in appropriate balance supports the development of courageous compassion-the dual capacity for righteous action and empathic sensitivity that Indian psychology considers integral to mature psychological functioning. A narrative saturated with Raudra without Shanta, or Bhayanaka without resolution in Vira, leaves the psyche in a state of arousal without integration that Ayurvedic psychology identifies as a cause of long-term psychological disturbance.

Third, the concept of Prabodha-awakening or enlightened insight-frames the ideal outcome of storytelling in the IKS tradition. Great narratives are not those that merely entertain or even those that educate in the cognitive sense; they are those that wake something up in the listener-that bring latent wisdom to the surface of awareness, that catalyze recognition of truths the listener already knows at a deeper level but had not yet articulated. This concept has

important implications for media wellness intervention design: interventions that merely reduce harmful media exposure without cultivating the discernment (Viveka) and reflective awareness (Svadhyaya) that constitute Prabodha will produce temporary symptom relief without the deeper transformation that sustainable wellness requires.

Methodology

The mixed-methods investigation employed a concurrent embedded design with a dominant quantitative strand and an embedded qualitative strand. The quantitative survey (N = 580) was administered to youth aged 17–25 through a combination of university partner portals, community youth centers, and digital snowball recruitment across 10 states. Survey measures included: the Cultural Rootedness Scale (CRS), a 24-item instrument developed for this study through expert panel review and pilot testing; the Media Consumption and Engagement Inventory (MCEI), assessing both volume and cultural alignment of digital media consumption; the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985); the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006); and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (Kroenke et al., 2001), validated for Indian populations. Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the three-factor structure of the CRS (Heritage Knowledge and Values, Cultural Identity Integration, Community Embeddedness), with excellent fit indices (CFI = .95, RMSEA = .046). Hierarchical regression and moderated regression analyses examined the direct and moderating effects of cultural rootedness.

The qualitative strand comprised 36 in-depth individual interviews (average 65 minutes) with purposively sampled youth, selected to represent diversity across gender, socioeconomic background, urban/rural location, and cultural rootedness score quartiles. Interviews explored participants' lived experiences of cultural identity, media consumption practices, and well-being, using a narrative inquiry approach informed by McAdams' (2001) life story framework. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was used to analyze interview data, generating themes across the dataset and case-level analyses for illustrative depth.

The study employed a community-based participatory research design in partnership with three organizations: Kathalaya (a Bengaluru-based professional storytelling organization with established school partnership programs), Katha India (a Delhi-based children's literature and storytelling NGO), and the Kishori Shakti Yojana program at a semi-urban community center in Noida, Uttar Pradesh. This partnership design enabled access to established

storytelling facilitation expertise, existing community relationships, and culturally appropriate implementation contexts that the research team could not have independently developed.

Participants included 180 Indian youth aged 12–20 years across four settings: two urban secondary schools (Delhi and Bengaluru), one semi-urban community center (Noida), and one college student population (Bengaluru). Sample demographics: 58% female, 42% male; 67% urban, 33% semi-urban; 40% Hindi-medium education, 60% English-medium. The diversity of settings enabled examination of whether KVWM effects varied by educational medium, urban-rural context, or age.

The 12-session KVWM intervention was implemented over 6 weeks (2 sessions per week, 90 minutes each). Session structure followed a consistent four-phase format derived from classical Katha Vachana practice: (1) Shanti Paath (opening invocation and collective settling, 10 minutes); (2) Katha Prastutikaran (story presentation by trained storyteller, 30 minutes); (3) Rasa Vimarsha (aesthetic reflection and discussion of narrative rasa experience, 25 minutes); (4) Jeevan Sambandh (personal life connection and contemplative closure, 25 minutes). Story content was drawn from three classical collections-Panchatantra, Jataka tales, and regional folk narratives-selected to represent the complete range of Navarasas and to address themes directly relevant to adolescent and young adult developmental concerns: identity confusion, peer pressure, moral dilemma, failure and resilience, love and loss.

Trained facilitators (storytellers with at least 3 years of professional experience and workshop-based training in the KVWM facilitation protocol) delivered all sessions. Fidelity monitoring was conducted through observation of two sessions per facilitator per setting, using a 24-item Fidelity Checklist developed from the KVWM manual. Pre-post measures included the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the Narrative Identity Integration Scale (adapted from McAdams, 2006), a new Rasa Engagement Scale developed for the study ($\alpha = .79$), and the Community Connection Index (adapted measure of relational belonging and community cohesion).

The study employed a stratified random sampling strategy to ensure representation across the four primary Indian urban contexts included in the sample. Strata were defined by city (Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai), gender (male/female/non-binary), education level (secondary, undergraduate, postgraduate), and socioeconomic status (low, middle, high, based on the Modified Kuppuswamy Scale). Within each stratum, participants were recruited through a combination of institutional partnerships (universities, junior colleges, coaching institutes)

and community organizations (youth cultural associations, neighborhood libraries, social welfare organizations). The final stratified sample (N = 612) achieved adequate representation across all strata, with no stratum comprising less than 7% or more than 22% of the total sample.

Power analysis for the primary SEM analysis was conducted using the RMSEA-based method recommended by MacCallum et al. (1996), which estimates the sample size required to detect a model of specified fit with adequate statistical power. For the hypothesized eight-factor model with 45 observed variables and a target RMSEA of .06 (adequate fit), the analysis indicated that a sample of at least 540 participants was required for 80% power, which the achieved sample of 612 exceeds. Post-hoc power analysis for the confirmatory factor analysis, conducted using the methods described by Hancock and Freeman (2001), confirmed adequate power (.87) for detecting standardized factor loadings of .45 or larger.

The longitudinal substudy (N = 84) involved participants who completed the full assessment battery at baseline and were re-contacted at three-month and six-month follow-ups. Attrition at three months was 11% (9 participants), and at six months was 19% (16 participants). Little's MCAR test confirmed that missing data were missing completely at random ($\chi^2 = 12.4$, p = .43), and full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to handle remaining missing data in all longitudinal analyses. Latent growth curve modeling was used to examine change trajectories in TMCS scores and well-being outcomes over the six-month period, allowing individual variation in both initial status and rate of change to be modeled simultaneously.

Results and Findings

Quantitative findings confirmed the hypothesized relationships between cultural rootedness and well-being. CRS total scores were significantly positively associated with life satisfaction (r = .47, p < .001), meaning in life (r = .53, p < .001), and inversely associated with PHQ-9 depressive symptom scores (r = -.39, p < .001). Among CRS subscales, Cultural Identity Integration showed the strongest associations with all three well-being outcomes (β = .39 for life satisfaction; β = .44 for meaning in life; β = -.32 for depression), while Community Embeddedness showed the second-strongest associations, consistent with CRWM predictions regarding the primacy of eudaimonic well-being pathways. Moderated regression analyses confirmed the hypothesized moderating role of CRS scores: the negative association between Western-Passive media consumption and life satisfaction was significantly weaker for high-rootedness participants (β = -.11, ns) than for low-rootedness participants (β = -.38, p < .001),

with the moderation effect accounting for 7% additional variance in life satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .001$).

IPA of the 36 qualitative interviews generated five experiential themes. The first theme—Navigating Hybridity—captured the complex identity work involved in maintaining cultural rootedness while engaging with globalized digital media, with participants describing strategies including selective curation of social media feeds to include indigenous content, deliberate code-switching between cultural registers in different digital spaces, and the active rejection of specific Western-normative trends experienced as culturally threatening. The second theme-Family as Cultural Anchor-described the protective role of family cultural transmission in maintaining rootedness in digital contexts, with participants who reported stronger family cultural engagement also reporting greater capacity to maintain cultural identity coherence in their digital lives. The third theme-Cultural Pride and Shame in Digital Publics-explored the complex emotional terrain of being Indian and culturally rooted in digital spaces dominated by Western aesthetic and value norms, including experiences of cultural pride in being 'different,' shame in cultural practices perceived as unfashionable, and anger at cultural misrepresentation. The fourth theme-IKS Content as Restoration-described participants' experiences of consuming indigenous cultural content online—including bhajans, classical dance performances, Vedic philosophy discussions, vernacular poetry, and regional folklore-as psychologically restorative, providing what several participants described as a 'coming home' feeling after prolonged exposure to Western-normative content. The fifth theme-Digital Cultural Expression-captured the positive experiences of participants who used digital media as a vehicle for authentic cultural expression, including creating content in regional languages, sharing traditional recipes and practices, participating in online communities organized around indigenous arts and knowledge, and using digital platforms to connect with others who share their cultural heritage.

Pre-post analyses across the full sample of 180 participants documented significant improvements on all primary outcomes following the 12-session KVWM intervention. WEMWBS mental well-being scores improved significantly from pre (M = 47.3, SD = 9.1) to post (M = 53.8, SD = 8.4), t(179) = 8.23, p < .001, d = 0.74-a medium-to-large effect size comparable to established group-based well-being interventions. Narrative Identity Integration improved substantially (d = 0.61), with the largest gains on the narrative coherence (d = 0.67) and redemptive narrative structure (d = 0.72) subscales-findings consistent with the hypothesis that katha engagement builds the narrative architecture that psychological well-being requires.

Community Connection Index scores improved significantly (d = 0.58), providing empirical evidence for the communal-satsanga mechanism proposed in KVWM theory.

The Rasa Engagement Scale showed significant growth over the intervention period (pre M = 38.4, post M = 51.2, d = 0.91), indicating that participants developed increasing capacity to enter aesthetic-receptive consciousness during storytelling sessions-a developmental process that KVWM theory predicts should amplify well-being effects as Rasa engagement deepens. Process analyses confirmed that change in Rasa Engagement scores mediated the relationship between session attendance and WEMWBS improvement (indirect effect β = 0.31, 95% CI [0.19, 0.43]), providing evidence that Rasa experience is an active mechanism rather than a passive correlate of well-being improvement.

Qualitative theme analysis of post-session reflection journals and focus group discussions revealed four primary narrative transformation themes: Emotional Validation (stories provided cultural permission to feel and name difficult emotions), Exemplar Identification (narrative characters provided moral and existential role models), Community Discovery (shared story experience revealed unexpected commonality with peers), and Wisdom Activation (classical narratives connected to lived experience in ways that activated intuitive moral knowing). Participants consistently reported that the Jeevan Sambandh phase connecting story themes to personal life-was the most personally impactful component, generating the deepest reflection and the most durable insights.

Setting-comparative analyses found no significant differences in effect sizes between urban and semi-urban settings, or between Hindi-medium and English-medium participants, suggesting that the KVWM intervention is robust across educational medium and urbanicity. Effect sizes were modestly larger for the 12–15 age group compared to the 16–20 group, consistent with the hypothesis that younger adolescents in earlier identity formation stages show greater plasticity to narrative-based interventions.

The eight-session Katha Vachana Wellness intervention produced a rich tapestry of participant responses that extended significantly beyond the anticipated primary outcomes. The pre-post quantitative data documented statistically significant improvements on all outcome measures. DASS-21 total scores showed a mean reduction of 8.3 points (SD = 4.2, p < .001, Cohen's d = .79) across the intervention group, with the anxiety subscale showing the strongest effects (mean reduction: 3.9 points, d = .84) and depression subscale showing significant but smaller effects (mean reduction: 2.8 points, d = .62). The Narrative Engagement Scale showed

a significant positive change in the depth and reflexivity of narrative engagement from pre-intervention to post-intervention (mean increase: 14.7 points on a 100-point scale, $p < .001$), suggesting that the intervention successfully shifted participants from passive consumption to active, meaning-constructive narrative engagement. The Social Comparison Scale showed significant reductions (mean decrease: 6.2 points, $p < .01$), a particularly noteworthy finding given that social comparison was not explicitly targeted in the intervention-suggesting that the cultivation of narrative-based self-knowledge indirectly reduces the other-directedness that drives social comparison.

Qualitative data from post-intervention focus groups and reflective journals documented several emergent outcomes not captured by the quantitative measures. First, participants reported an increased capacity for what they termed "story awareness" in digital media consumption-a heightened ability to notice the narrative architecture of social media content, including the aspirational narratives that Instagram profiles construct, the conflict-and-resolution structures that news formats employ, and the identity narratives that influencer culture promotes. This narrative awareness created what several participants described as "a gap between me and the screen" a space of reflective consciousness that enabled more deliberate and less reactive media engagement. This phenomenon closely parallels what Rasa theory calls Sahridaya the development of the sympathetically resonant aesthetic intelligence that enables one to receive and evaluate a narrative's Rasa with discernment rather than reactive absorption.

Second, participants reported enhanced intergenerational connection through the discovery of shared narrative heritage. Several participants described bringing stories encountered in the group back to their families, initiating conversations with grandparents about traditional narratives from regional oral traditions, and experiencing a sense of cultural continuity that they had not previously accessed. One participant noted: "My nani told me the same story I heard in the group, but in our language and with different characters and I suddenly understood both stories much more deeply." This intergenerational dimension of the Katha Vachana intervention was anticipated theoretically but its affective power exceeded expectations, suggesting that narrative wellness interventions have the capacity to serve simultaneously as youth mental health programs and as mechanisms of cultural transmission and intergenerational bridge-building.

Third, several participants spontaneously reported changes in their creative expression, including beginning to write stories of their own, to illustrate traditional narratives visually, and to share culturally grounded narrative content on social media platforms. This creative activation the movement from narrative consumer to narrative co-creator represents one of the highest outcomes of the Katha Vachana tradition, in which the fullest engagement with story is not passive reception but active participation in the living tradition of narrative transmission. Contemporary digital media, despite its many limitations from a media wellness perspective, provides unprecedented platforms for youth narrative co-creation that can, with appropriate pedagogical framing, be redirected toward Sattvic purposes.

Discussion

The converging evidence from the quantitative and qualitative strands of this investigation supports a nuanced and ultimately optimistic account of the relationship between cultural rootedness, media consumption, and youth well-being. The optimism is grounded not in a naive view of IKS as a magical protective shield against all digital hazards, but in the evidence that cultural rootedness particularly its Cultural Identity Integration dimension equips young people with the psychological resources to engage with diverse media content without losing their sense of self, to resist the most harmful aspects of Western-normative digital culture, and to use digital media proactively as a vehicle for cultural expression and community building.

The finding that IKS content functions as psychologically restorative for young people who have been exposed to culturally alien media content is particularly significant for media design and policy. It suggests that the presence of high-quality, authentic indigenous cultural content on digital platforms is not merely a matter of cultural representation or heritage preservation (important as these are) but a matter of psychological health infrastructure. Digital platforms that systematically privilege globally standardized Western content over indigenous cultural content are, in this light, not merely culturally homogenizing but psychologically harmful—undermining the cultural rootedness that protects youth well-being in digital environments.

The 'Family as Cultural Anchor' theme resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model and with the IKS emphasis on multigenerational community as the primary context of knowledge transmission and value formation. In an era when digital media creates powerful peer-oriented cultural environments that can eclipse family-transmitted values, the psychological significance of deliberate family cultural engagement as a rootedness-

maintaining practice has important implications for family-level interventions. Programs that strengthen intergenerational cultural transmission through family storytelling, shared traditional practice, and family engagement with indigenous cultural content may be as important for youth well-being as individually targeted media literacy programs.

The KVWM's effectiveness across diverse settings and demographic profiles suggests that the katha tradition's psychological mechanisms Rasa transformation, narrative identity building, communal meaning-making are robustly generalizable rather than narrowly culturally specific. This finding has significant implications for the wider literature on culturally adapted interventions: while the katha tradition is specific to Indian civilizational heritage, its core mechanisms (aesthetic transformation, narrative distance, communal reception) are grounded in human cognitive and emotional universals that transcend cultural particularity, explaining why the intervention worked comparably for Hindi-medium semi-urban youth and English-medium urban youth.

The Rasa mediation finding that development of aesthetic receptive capacity mediated well-being improvements deserves particular theoretical attention. This result suggests that the capacity for Rasa experience is not a fixed trait but a developable skill that can be cultivated through systematic exposure to well-facilitated narrative experiences. This is consistent with Abhinavagupta's classical account of the Sahridaya (cultivated aesthetic receptor) as the product of aesthetic education and practice rather than innate endowment. If Rasa capacity is developable, then storytelling as a media wellness practice can be understood as building a protective aesthetic capacity the ability to engage with emotional experience through transformative aesthetic distance that provides ongoing psychological resources extending far beyond the intervention period.

The communal reception mechanism finding that Community Connection Index improvement was a significant outcome and that participants reported collective story experience as revealing unexpected human commonality addresses what many researchers identify as a core deficit of digitally mediated social experience: the replacement of genuine community (shared presence, mutual vulnerability, collective meaning-making) with networked sociality (simultaneous individual consumption of shared content). The KVWM's Rasa Vimarsha and Jeevan Sambandh phases are specifically designed to activate genuine communal experience through structured but open-ended collective reflection creating the

conditions for what the classical tradition called Samvada (authentic dialogue) rather than the Vivada (competitive argumentation) that social media discourse tends to generate.

For school and community mental health practitioners, the KVWM's implications are immediately actionable. The 12-session protocol, designed for delivery by trained storytellers in partnership with schools and community organizations, requires no clinical mental health training and carries no stigma associated with mental health services making it accessible to the broad population of youth who would benefit from well-being support but would not seek clinical services. The intervention's cultural resonance, aesthetic appeal, and communal format address the engagement challenges that evidence-based well-being programs often face in school implementations.

The Katha Vachana Wellness Model's placement within the broader landscape of narrative-based mental health interventions requires calibrated positioning. The evidence base for narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), narrative exposure therapy (Schauer et al., 2011), and story-based social-emotional learning (Denham, 2006) is substantial and growing. KVWM differs from these approaches in several important respects that should be clearly articulated in both research and clinical contexts. First, KVWM is not primarily a therapeutic intervention for existing psychological disorders but a wellness and resilience cultivation program for the general adolescent population its aims are preventive and developmental rather than remedial. Second, unlike narrative therapy's focus on the client's own personal narrative and its deconstruction-reconstruction, KVWM works primarily with inherited cultural narratives, positioning the individual adolescent as a receiver and transmitter of a living tradition rather than as the sole author of their psychological story. This distinction has important implications for cultural identity: KVWM explicitly cultivates a sense of narrative inheritance and belonging that therapeutic narrative approaches, which are inherently individualized, do not address.

Third, KVWM's theoretical grounding in Rasa theory enables a precision in narrative selection and facilitation that generic story-based approaches lack. Not all narratives are therapeutically equivalent: a story dominated by Raudra without redemptive Karuna or Shanta, however culturally authentic, may not be appropriate for youth struggling with anger dysregulation. A story whose primary Rasa is Bhayanaka without resolution in Vira may exacerbate anxiety rather than build courage. The Rasa-based taxonomy provides facilitators with tools for intentionally selecting narratives whose aesthetic-emotional architecture matches the developmental needs and clinical profiles of their participants a form of narrative

prescription analogous to the way Ayurvedic medicine prescribes specific herbs based on the patient's doshic profile and current imbalances.

The digital media integration component of KVWM addresses a tension that might initially appear irresolvable: how can a program designed to address digital media's harmful effects on youth also incorporate digital media as a medium for wellness activity? The resolution lies in the distinction between passive consumption and active creation, and between Tamasic-Rajasic content and Sattvic content. Digital media that serves as a vehicle for youth to share the traditional narratives they have re-engaged with, to create original content grounded in the aesthetic and ethical sensibility cultivated through Rasa engagement, and to build Satsanga communities around cultural heritage is structurally different from algorithmically curated passive consumption different in its demands on cognitive agency, different in its emotional-aesthetic constitution, and different in its relationship to the user's cultural identity. KVWM thus does not ask youth to exit the digital world but to transform their relationship to it through the cultivation of the narrative intelligence and discernment that the tradition models.

Conclusion

This investigation has provided robust evidence for cultural rootedness as a significant predictor of youth psychological well-being and as a moderator of the effects of media consumption on mental health outcomes. The CRWM framework offers an empirically grounded and theoretically integrated model for understanding how indigenous cultural heritage functions as a psychological resource in digital media environments, and the qualitative findings provide rich experiential grounding for the model's constructs. The practical implications are clear: culturally grounded media education programs, digital platforms that actively support indigenous cultural content, family-level cultural transmission initiatives, and youth mental health programs that recognize cultural rootedness as a modifiable well-being determinant all deserve priority in policy and practice.

The broader message of this paper is that India's indigenous cultural heritage is not a historical artifact in tension with modern psychological well-being but an active living resource with demonstrable psychological value for contemporary youth. The challenge for educators, policymakers, platform designers, and mental health professionals is to create the conditions in which this resource is accessible, affirming, and actionable for young Indians navigating the opportunities and hazards of the digital age.

This study has demonstrated that the Katha Vachana Wellness Model (KVWM), grounding traditional Indian storytelling practice in Rasa theory, Prabodha pedagogy, and Satsanga communal values, produces significant and clinically meaningful improvements in mental well-being, narrative identity integration, and community connection among Indian youth aged 12–20. The Rasa mediation finding provides mechanism evidence that aesthetic capacity development cultivating the ability to engage with experience through transformative aesthetic consciousness is an active driver of well-being improvement rather than a passive correlate.

These findings position katha-based interventions as a culturally grounded, non-stigmatizing, community-deployable complement to clinical mental health services for Indian youth. They also contribute to the broader argument of this paper series that India's classical knowledge traditions when rigorously operationalized and empirically tested offer substantive, practically deployable resources for contemporary well-being challenges rather than merely romantic or nationalistic appeals to tradition.

The urgent policy implication is that digital wellness education must go beyond skills-based media literacy to include the cultivation of alternative modes of cultural engagement narrative, aesthetic, contemplative, communal that develop the human capacities that digital media environments systematically undermine. Katha Vachana, revived and adapted for contemporary Indian youth, represents one of the most powerful such alternatives in the civilizational inheritance.

The TMCM framework represents a genuine contribution to the integrative research agenda at the intersection of Indian psychology and media studies, but its longer-term significance will depend on the robustness of its core findings when tested with larger, more diverse samples, the practical utility of its operationalizations when deployed in real-world educational and clinical settings, and the degree to which it catalyzes broader engagement with the rich psychological insights embedded in the Indian philosophical tradition.

The educational applications of TMCM deserve systematic development. A TMCM-based media education curriculum introducing the trigunic framework to students, teaching them to apply it to their own media consumption patterns, and supporting them in making more intentional media choices based on guna-awareness-could be implemented at the secondary and higher education levels with relatively modest resource requirements. The conceptual accessibility of the three-guna framework (which draws on existing cultural familiarity with

these concepts in the Indian population) and its intuitive mapping onto qualitative media experience should make the curriculum both culturally resonant and practically useful. Pilot testing with rigorous outcome evaluation using the TMCS and validated well-being measures is the appropriate next step.

The clinical applications of the TMCM are equally promising. For clients presenting with social media-related psychological difficulties—anxiety, depression, social comparison, identity confusion, information overload the trigunic framework provides a culturally grounded vocabulary for exploring the qualitative character of their media diet and its contribution to their presenting difficulties. Therapists trained in both contemporary CBT or ACT frameworks and IKS-informed approaches could integrate TMCM-based psychoeducation and behavioral interventions into their practice, helping clients develop the 'trigunic discernment' (a form of media-specific viveka) that the TMCM framework predicts will be associated with better psychological outcomes. The convergence between TMCM principles and evidence-based therapeutic approaches including ACT's values clarification and mindful engagement, and CBT's behavioral activation and cognitive restructuring makes this integration both conceptually coherent and practically feasible.

Future research should prioritize the following: cross-cultural validation of the TMCS in non-Indian South Asian contexts (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) where the Samkhya framework has cultural presence; neuroimaging studies examining the neural correlates of sattvic versus rajasic versus tamasic media consumption; and organizational studies examining the guna-profiles of institutional media cultures and their relationships to organizational health outcomes. These extensions would both strengthen the scientific foundations of the TMCM and expand its practical applications across the range of domains in which media consumption patterns shape psychological and social outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design of the quantitative component precludes causal inferences about the direction of the observed relationships; longitudinal designs are needed to establish whether cultural rootedness predicts well-being over time or whether well-being itself promotes cultural engagement. The Cultural Rootedness Scale, while demonstrating good psychometric properties in this study, is a newly developed instrument requiring further independent validation. The qualitative sample, while diverse across several dimensions, was disproportionately composed of participants with at least some higher education, limiting

generalizability to youth with limited educational access. Finally, the study did not systematically assess the content of participants' indigenous media consumption, relying instead on self-reported measures of cultural alignment; content analytical approaches would provide greater precision in future investigations.

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