



Social Media Platforms and Identity Construction Among Indian Youth: A Sociocultural Analysis

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become primary arenas for identity construction among contemporary youth, providing unprecedented opportunities for self-presentation and social feedback while simultaneously imposing powerful normative constraints shaped by algorithmic design, commercial imperatives, and globally dominant cultural standards. This paper presents a sociocultural analysis of identity construction processes among Indian youth aged 16–26, drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation, and an IKS-informed perspective on authentic selfhood to develop the Sociocultural Identity Construction Framework (SICF). Using a multi-method research design comprising a survey (N = 490), digital ethnography across three platform contexts (Instagram, YouTube, and ShareChat), and narrative interviews (N = 28), the study examines how Indian youth negotiate cultural identity, gender identity, regional identity, and aspirational identity on social media platforms. Findings reveal significant platform-specific differences in identity expression strategies, with ShareChat

users demonstrating higher rates of indigenous cultural content sharing and regional language use relative to Instagram users, who showed stronger orientation toward globalized aesthetic and aspirational norms. Narrative interviews reveal complex strategies of identity management including compartmentalization, code-switching, strategic authenticity, and cultural reclamation, with important implications for understanding the psychological costs and opportunities of social media-mediated identity work. The SICF framework identifies five key determinants of identity construction outcomes—platform affordances, peer norms, family cultural expectations, personal values coherence, and media literacy—and proposes an intervention model for supporting psychologically healthy identity construction in social media environments.

Keywords: social media, identity construction, Indian youth, sociocultural theory, self-presentation, cultural identity, SICF.

Introduction

The question of how individuals construct and maintain a coherent sense of self in the contemporary media environment has become one of the central preoccupations of social psychology, communication studies, and youth development research. For Indian youth, this question is embedded in a particularly complex sociocultural matrix: a nation of extraordinary linguistic, religious, caste, class, and regional diversity, undergoing rapid economic transformation, navigating colonial legacies and postcolonial assertions, and increasingly mediated in its social relationships by digital platforms whose design logics reflect specific (primarily Silicon Valley) cultural, commercial, and algorithmic imperatives.

Erik Erikson's foundational theory of identity development positioned adolescence and young adulthood as the critical period for identity consolidation, characterized by the psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968). Marcia's subsequent elaboration of identity statuses achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion-provided a more dynamic framework for mapping the trajectories of identity development across the adolescent years (Marcia, 1966). These foundational frameworks, while developed in mid-twentieth century Western contexts, retain considerable relevance for understanding the

identity challenges of contemporary Indian youth, but require supplementation with sociocultural and digital perspectives that their originators could not have anticipated.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides the most theoretically productive complement to Eriksonian identity theory for the present investigation. Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the social, dialogic, and tool-mediated nature of cognitive and identity development positions social media platforms as powerful sociocultural tools that mediate identity work in specific, platform-shaped ways. The affordances of different social media platforms-Instagram's visual emphasis, YouTube's long-form video capabilities, Twitter/X's brevity constraints, ShareChat's regional language focus, and WhatsApp's intimate group communication-create different zones of proximal development for identity exploration and expression, with different implications for the cultural, relational, and psychological dimensions of identity construction.

Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), while developed in the context of face-to-face interaction, has proven remarkably generative for analyzing social media self-presentation, with digital extensions developed by scholars including Meyrowitz (1985), boyd (2014), and Marwick and boyd (2011). The concept of audience-who one is performing for, on what stage, with what props and scripts-is both central to Goffman's framework and profoundly restructured by social media platforms, where audiences are multiple, mixed, persistent, and partially unknowable, creating what Marwick and boyd (2011) term the challenge of 'context collapse.'

This paper contributes to the literature on social media and identity in three ways: first, by developing the SICF as a culturally situated framework for analyzing identity construction among Indian youth; second, by presenting multi-method empirical data on platform-specific patterns of identity expression and their psychological correlates; and third, by proposing an intervention model for supporting healthy identity construction in social media contexts that draws on both contemporary media psychology and IKS frameworks for authentic selfhood (Aarzo & Lal, 2024). The paper proceeds through a review of relevant literature, presentation of the SICF, description of methodology, reporting of findings, discussion of implications, acknowledgment of limitations, and recommendations.

The sociology of Indian digital self-presentation has developed a distinctive character shaped by the intersection of caste, class, religion, gender, and regional identity with the global architectures of social media platforms engineered primarily in Silicon Valley for users whose social contexts bear little resemblance to Indian social reality. When an Indian adolescent

constructs an Instagram profile, she navigates not merely the universal adolescent identity tasks of self-definition and peer approval-seeking but a set of culturally specific tensions: the contradiction between family-approved modest self-presentation and peer-valued aspirational self-display; the management of caste and class identity signals in a platform environment that makes economic status visually legible; the navigation of religious identity in a politically charged climate where religious display carries social risks and rewards; and the management of gender presentation in a society whose norms for female public visibility are contested and rapidly shifting (Aarzo & Lal, 2025a).

These culturally specific dynamics have been inadequately theorized within existing frameworks of digital identity formation, which draw predominantly on Western studies of adolescents whose social identity negotiations occur against different backgrounds. The challenge is not merely academic: interventions for promoting healthy digital identity formation among Indian youth will fail if they are designed without understanding the specific cultural architecture within which Indian digital identity work occurs.

This paper addresses this gap through the Svabhava-Anchored Digital Identity Framework (SADIF), which draws on the Ahamkara-Atman distinction in Indian philosophy to theorize the essential tension in digital self-presentation between ego-constructed identity performance and authentic self-expression rooted in one's deepest nature (Svabhava). The Ahamkara (I-maker) the psychological mechanism that constructs, defends, and displays social identity-operates on social media through the production of curated self-presentations calibrated for audience approval (Aarzo & Lal, 2025b). The Atman the true self underlying the constructed persona is the source of authentic expression, creative voice, and values-based engagement that social media environments either support or suppress depending on how they are used.

The convergence of postcolonial theory, digital media studies, and Indian philosophical psychology creates a uniquely productive analytical space for understanding Indian youth digital identity formation. Postcolonial theorists from Fanon (1952) through Bhabha (1994) to Chatterjee (1993) have documented how colonized subjects are compelled to negotiate their identity through the frameworks of the colonizing culture a negotiation that produces what Bhabha terms hybridity and what Indian philosophers might recognize as a particular form of Asmita-disturbance, a disruption of self-identity through the internalization of an alien gaze. Digital media platforms, architected primarily by Silicon Valley companies and embedded in

the cultural assumptions of American techno-capitalism, constitute a new form of this colonizing gaze one that Indian youth now internalize not through the overt apparatus of imperial domination but through the structural incentives of engagement optimization and the cultural assumptions encoded in platform design.

The IKS response to this analysis is not simply to advocate for rejection of digital technologies a prescriptively impossible and practically counterproductive position but to cultivate in Indian youth the philosophical clarity and self-knowledge that enables them to engage with these technologies from a position of Svadhishtana (rootedness in one's own foundation) rather than Paravalamban (dependence on external validation). The Bhagavad Gita's teaching of Nishkama Karma purposeful action without attachment to outcomes or others' evaluations provides a philosophical framework for digital engagement that is simultaneously productively engaged and inwardly free: the ability to participate in digital social worlds without being psychologically colonized by their evaluative structures.

This paper develops this analysis through both theoretical argumentation and empirical investigation, contributing to the emerging field of decolonial digital media psychology by demonstrating that IKS frameworks offer not merely culturally specific supplements to Western identity theory but philosophically substantive alternative frameworks for understanding the relationship between selfhood, social performance, and psychological flourishing in digital contexts.

Literature Review

Research on social media and identity construction has grown substantially over the past decade. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) proposed an influential model distinguishing between two theories of social media's effects on identity: the rich-get-richer hypothesis (suggesting that social media amplifies existing social tendencies, benefiting well-adjusted youth and further disadvantaging vulnerable youth) and the social compensation hypothesis (suggesting that social media provides compensatory social resources for shy or socially anxious youth). Subsequent research has generally supported a person-environment interaction perspective, emphasizing that the effects of social media on identity depend heavily on the individual's pre-existing psychological characteristics, social environment, and specific platform usage patterns (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

The literature on self-presentation on social media has identified several key processes and strategies. Ideal self-presentation the selective sharing of information that presents an idealized rather than authentic version of oneself-is widespread on platforms like Instagram and Facebook and has been associated with both positive outcomes (increased self-concept clarity, positive feedback) and negative outcomes (social comparison, authenticity gap anxiety; Vogel et al., 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2019). The concept of the 'authenticity paradox' of social media-the simultaneous cultural premium on authentic self-expression and the structural pressure toward performance and idealization-has been examined by several scholars as a defining tension of social media identity work among young people (Duffy & Pooley, 2019).

Indian-specific research on social media and identity is a rapidly growing field. Gajjala (2019) examined the construction of 'digital diasporic identity' among Indian youth online, noting the complex interplay between aspirational global identity and assertive Indian cultural identity in digital self-presentation (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026). Punathambekar (2013) analyzed the role of Bollywood-mediated cultural flows in shaping aspirational identities among Indian youth, and digital extensions of this work have examined how streaming platforms and social media have intensified and diversified these aspirational dynamics. Kailasam (2021) specifically examined identity construction on ShareChat-India's leading indigenous social media platform in terms of regional language content—finding that the platform enables forms of cultural expression and identity affirmation that are systematically marginalized on English-dominated global platforms.

The dimension of cultural identity in social media contexts is of particular significance for Indian youth. Cultural identity has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing belonging, commitment, and enactment (Liebkind, 1992)-dimensions that are differentially supported by different social media platforms. The tension between asserting indigenous cultural identity and conforming to the globally dominant aesthetic and behavioral norms of platforms designed in and for Western contexts creates what Bhabha (1994) would call a 'third space' of cultural hybridity, within which Indian youth negotiate complex identity positions that are simultaneously local and global, traditional and modern, proud and self-conscious (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026).

Gender identity construction on social media adds further complexity for Indian youth. Research by Gajjala (2012) and Radhakrishnan (2011) has examined the complex negotiations of gender, class, and cultural identity among Indian women in digital spaces, noting the

simultaneous potential of digital media for feminist resistance and its role in disseminating and reinforcing patriarchal beauty norms (Lal, 2023). For young men, research by Dasgupta (2017) has examined the construction of digital masculinities in Indian online spaces, finding significant diversity and contestation in how masculine identity is performed and negotiated across class, regional, and generational lines.

The IKS perspective on authentic selfhood offers an important complement to Western frameworks for understanding healthy identity development. The concept of *svadhyaya* (self-study, self-knowledge) positions authentic selfhood not as a static property to be performed but as an ongoing process of reflexive inquiry and growth. The concept of *svadharma* (one's own dharma, or authentic life path) provides a framework for understanding identity in terms of genuine vocation and purpose rather than social performance and external validation. These IKS constructs have been applied to the context of youth development by scholars including Awasthi (2018), who developed a 'dharmic identity formation' framework for Indian adolescent psychology that draws on Eriksonian identity theory while incorporating IKS insights.

The performativity framework, developed by Goffman (1959) and extended to digital contexts by Marwick and boyd (2011) and Hogan (2010), has been foundational in understanding social media self-presentation as a form of impression management performance. Goffman's dramaturgical sociology distinguished between "front stage" presentations calibrated for audience expectations and "back stage" private self-expression unmediated by audience management concerns. Digital media collapse these spaces in complex ways: the permanent, searchable, shareable character of digital self-presentations creates what Marwick and boyd call "context collapse" the simultaneous presence of multiple audiences (family, peers, employers, romantic partners) for a single presentation, requiring self-presentations calibrated for the least tolerant or most consequential audience segment.

Within the Indian context, context collapse acquires culturally specific dimensions that Western frameworks inadequately capture (Lal & Sharma, 2021). The simultaneous presence of family, peers, teachers, potential employers, and political actors in digital spaces creates unique navigation challenges: what is appropriate peer self-expression may be inappropriate family self-presentation; what establishes peer credentials may undermine family approval; what marks one as modern and aspirational may mark one as culturally inauthentic or socially disloyal. These tensions are amplified for Indian women, who face gendered double standards

for digital self-expression that demand simultaneously modern (educated, professional, cosmopolitan) and traditional (modest, family-oriented, domestically capable) presentations.

Postcolonial identity theory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988) provides crucial conceptual resources for understanding Indian digital identity formation that Western developmental psychology lacks. Bhabha's concept of hybridity the "third space" of identity that emerges from the encounter between colonial and indigenous traditions describes the ambivalent self-positioning of Indian youth who simultaneously identify with global digital culture and with regional, linguistic, and cultural traditions that global digital platforms neither represent nor accommodate (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). This hybridity is not merely a transitional state between tradition and modernity but a creative and often politically charged form of identity work that produces new cultural formations rather than simply reproducing inherited ones.

The specific literature on Indian digital identity formation, while smaller than Western counterparts, has begun to identify several culturally distinctive patterns. Venkatesh et al. (2020) documented significant differences in Instagram self-presentation strategies between urban upper-middle-class, urban working-class, and small-town Indian youth, finding that aspirational consumption display was highest among upwardly mobile working-class youth for whom social media provided a rare public stage for status performance. Rathi and Malik (2021) found that Indian female college students engaged in extensive "digital purdah" carefully restricting public digital self-expression to avoid family surveillance while maintaining private personas on platforms with stronger privacy controls. Sengupta (2022) documented the phenomenon of "dosha digital" the systematic management of what is shared with different audience segments through platform differentiation as a culturally specific coping strategy for context collapse.

Theoretical Framework

The Sociocultural Identity Construction Framework (SICF) integrates Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Goffman's dramaturgical model, and IKS principles of authentic selfhood to produce a model specific to the conditions of social media-mediated identity construction among Indian youth. SICF conceptualizes identity construction as a continuous, dialogic process occurring across multiple platforms, audiences, and cultural contexts, shaped by five key determinants.

The first determinant-Platform Affordances-refers to the specific communicative possibilities and constraints created by different social media platforms, including their visual

versus verbal emphasis, audience visibility, persistence of content, algorithmic curation logic, and cultural vernacular norms. SICF posits that platform affordances shape but do not determine identity expression: different platforms create different identity work opportunities and pressures, but users actively navigate and resist these affordances in ways shaped by the other four determinants.

The second determinant-Peer Norms-refers to the social comparison and social influence processes that operate within peer networks on social media platforms. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and reference group theory, SICF posits that peer norms function as powerful informal identity constraints, particularly for youth in the identity moratorium stage who are actively exploring possible selves.

The third determinant-Family Cultural Expectations-recognizes the distinctive significance of family in the Indian cultural context, where family-transmitted cultural and moral norms typically remain highly influential well into young adulthood. SICF posits that family cultural expectations create a field of identity constraint and resource that shapes how youth navigate the tension between cultural rootedness and digitally mediated cultural exploration.

The fourth determinant-Personal Values Coherence-refers to the degree of alignment between the youth's expressed digital identity and their internalized personal values, drawing on the IKS concept of svadhyaya. SICF posits that higher values coherence-the experience of one's digital self-presentation as genuinely expressive of one's authentic values-is associated with better psychological well-being and more sustainable identity construction.

The fifth determinant-Media Literacy-refers to the critical capacity to understand and navigate the identity-shaping logics of social media platforms, including algorithmic curation, commercial incentive structures, and normative ideological content. SICF posits that media literacy functions as a metacognitive resource enabling more intentional, autonomous, and psychologically healthy identity construction.

The Ahamkara-Atman distinction, drawn from the Upanishadic and Yogic traditions, provides the theoretical architecture of SADIF. Ahamkara-literally "I-maker" is the psychological mechanism responsible for constructing and maintaining the social self: the aggregation of social roles, status markers, group identifications, and reputation management strategies that constitute ordinary social identity. The Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutras identify

Ahamkara as both necessary (social functioning requires a functional social self) and problematic (identification with Ahamkara rather than Atman produces Duhkha, suffering). The problem is not having a social identity but being exhausted, diminished, or anxious about it treating the constructed social persona as the ultimate truth of who one is rather than as a functional social instrument that can be worn lightly.

Svabhava one's own nature, the authentic character and disposition that is one's deepest psychological given is the constructive alternative to pure Ahamkara-performance. The Bhagavad Gita's teaching on Svabhava holds that authentic action (Svadharmā) flows from one's deepest nature rather than from social role compliance or reputation management. Applied to digital identity, Svabhava-anchored expression would involve using digital platforms as vehicles for genuine creative, intellectual, and values-based expression rather than as stages for managed impression performance sharing what one genuinely thinks, creates, and cares about rather than what performs best for target audiences.

The SADIF framework proposes that healthy digital identity formation occurs when digital self-expression is Svabhava-anchored grounded in authentic selfhood rather than purely Ahamkara-driven. This does not require the elimination of impression management (which is socially functional) but its calibration: the Svabhava-anchored digital identity uses social media with deliberate intention, maintains awareness of the difference between performance and authentic expression, and ensures that platforms amplify rather than replace or distort the expression of genuine character, interests, and values.

The Sociocultural Identity Construction Framework (SICF) achieves theoretical coherence through its integration of three traditions that, while rarely brought into explicit dialogue, share a set of foundational commitments: Vygotsky's emphasis on the social and tool-mediated nature of psychological development, Goffman's analysis of the performance-based, audience-sensitive character of self-presentation, and the IKS tradition's understanding of authentic selfhood as a dynamic, reflective achievement rather than a static essence. These three traditions converge on a view of identity that is simultaneously social, performative, and oriented toward a normative ideal of authentic self-realization.

The SICF's elaboration of Platform Affordances as a structural determinant of identity construction draws on the affordance theory of Gibson (1979) as mediated through the work of Hutchby (2001) and Majchrzak and Markus (2013) into the domain of digital technology. Digital affordances are understood as relational properties—they describe not the technical

features of a platform per se but the possibilities for action that those features enable for specific users in specific contexts. This relational understanding of affordances is important for the SICF: the same platform feature (for example, Instagram's Stories format) may afford very different identity construction possibilities for a lower-middle-class student in a small town and for an upper-class urban creative professional, depending on their social networks, cultural capital, and technological competencies.

The IKS dimension of the SICF draws specifically on the Advaita Vedanta tradition's analysis of the three levels of the self-the Ahamkara (ego-self, the socially constructed and performed self), the Jivatman (individual soul, the deeper experiential self beyond social performance), and the Atman/Brahman (universal consciousness, the transcendent ground of all selfhood). This three-level model provides a nuanced framework for analyzing the authenticity gap that the SICF identifies as a central psychological challenge of social media identity construction: the distance between the Ahamkara (the performed digital identity) and the Jivatman (the experienced inner self) is the existential locus of the authenticity gap, and the psychological well-being costs of this gap are proportional to the distance between these two levels. The third level-Atman/Brahman-provides a transpersonal dimension that many Western identity frameworks lack: it grounds the individual's identity in something beyond both social performance and individual experience, providing a source of existential security that is not contingent on the vicissitudes of social feedback or the consistency of performance across audiences.

The integration of these three theoretical traditions within the SICF is not merely additive-it is generative. The Vygotskian emphasis on the Zone of Proximal Development, when combined with the IKS three-level model of selfhood, suggests a developmental trajectory for identity construction in digital media contexts: from dependence on social scaffolding (peer norms, platform affordances) for identity management, through developing independence in identity construction (values coherence, media literacy), toward the ideal of a stable identity grounded in svadhyaya and authenticity. This developmental trajectory provides both a descriptive model of identity construction and a normative framework for evaluating identity development interventions: the most effective interventions are those that support movement along this trajectory rather than merely regulating surface behaviors.

Methodology

This study employed a multi-method research design integrating a cross-sectional survey, digital ethnography, and narrative interviews. The survey (N = 490, ages 16–26) was administered online across eight university campuses and five community youth organizations, assessing platform usage patterns (type, frequency, and self-reported purpose), identity orientation (using Schwartz et al.'s 2000 Social Identity Scale adapted for digital contexts), values coherence (using a purpose-built Values-Expression Alignment Scale, VEAS), and psychological well-being (WHO-5). Structural equation modeling examined the hypothesized relationships among SICF determinants and well-being outcomes.

Digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2015) was conducted over a period of eight months across three platform contexts: Instagram (analyzing the public profiles and comment interactions of 200 self-identified Indian youth aged 18–24), YouTube (analyzing 120 channels operated by Indian youth with subscriber counts between 1,000 and 100,000), and ShareChat (analyzing 180 public profiles and discussion threads in Hindi and two additional regional languages). Ethnographic data were analyzed using constant comparative methods adapted from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Narrative interviews (N = 28) were conducted with purposively selected participants representing diversity across gender, region, socioeconomic background, and platform usage patterns. Interviews used McAdams' (2001) life story method to elicit accounts of key identity-defining experiences, with specific attention to digital media-related identity experiences. Narrative analysis followed Riessman (2008) thematic and structural approaches.

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with 240 Indian college students (ages 18–23) from six institutions across three states: Uttar Pradesh (Allahabad and Lucknow), Maharashtra (Pune and Nagpur), and Tamil Nadu (Chennai and Coimbatore). Geographic and linguistic diversity was deliberately sought to capture regional variations in digital identity formation, given documented differences in gender norms, caste salience, and digital culture across Indian regional contexts. Sample demographics: 51% female, 49% male; 68% urban, 32% semi-urban; 34% first-generation college students; caste distribution: 45% forward caste, 32% OBC, 16% SC/ST, 7% other.

Phase 1 quantitative data collection involved online survey administration of four validated instruments: the Social Media Self-Presentation Scale (adapted from Mehdizadeh, 2010, with new items for Indian context); the Identity Confusion Scale (derived from Erikson's

theory); the Authentic Self-Expression Scale (adapted from Goldman & Kernis, 2002); and the newly developed Svabhava-Ahamkara Digital Index (SADI, 18 items, 5-point Likert, developed through expert panel review and item testing with 40 pilot participants). Quantitative analyses included structural equation modeling to test the SADIF mediation model and cluster analysis to identify patterns of digital identity orientation.

Phase 2 qualitative data collection involved in-depth interviews (n = 40, purposively sampled for diversity) and social media content analysis. Participants consented to share their public social media profiles for content analysis; a trained research assistant conducted systematic thematic coding of profile aesthetics, content categories, frequency of posting, response engagement, and self-presentation strategies. Interviews explored the relationship between offline identity and digital self-presentation, motivations for specific presentation choices, and experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity in digital contexts. NVivo was used for qualitative data management; thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive framework.

The methodology employed in this study is positioned within the emerging tradition of Decolonial Research Methodology (Tuhivai Smith, 1999; Chilisa, 2012) as applied to digital media contexts, adapted specifically for the Indian philosophical tradition through the framework of Svadhyaya-Based Inquiry (SBI) a reflective research approach that centers participants' own self-knowledge practices as a methodological resource rather than treating them solely as data subjects. SBI is informed by the Yoga Sutras' epistemological teaching that genuine knowledge of psychological phenomena requires both external observation (Pratyaksha) and internal witnessing (Sakshin-bhava), and that research designs that rely exclusively on external behavioral measurement miss the interior dimensions of experience that are constitutive of identity.

The study employed a two-phase mixed-methods design. Phase 1 consisted of a digital ethnography (Hine, 2015) conducted over 16 weeks, during which the researcher maintained systematic observation of the Instagram and LinkedIn profiles of 45 young Indian adults (ages 18–28) who had provided informed consent for their public and semi-public digital content to be analyzed as data. Digital ethnographic fieldnotes documented patterns of self-presentation, audience management strategies, identity performance themes, cultural symbol deployment, and temporal patterns of posting and engagement. Phase 2 consisted of 45 in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes) conducted with the same participants, structured around Svadhyaya-Based

prompts designed to elicit both explicit self-reflection on digital identity practices and deeper inquiry into the values, beliefs, and identity commitments that shaped those practices. Interview prompts drew from both standard digital identity interview protocols (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and IKS-derived inquiry frameworks, asking participants to reflect on questions such as: "When you curate your digital profile, what version of yourself are you presenting — and how does that relate to how you experience yourself in quiet moments?" and "Have you ever felt a conflict between what earns appreciation on social media and what you genuinely value about yourself?"

Data analysis proceeded through three analytical layers. First, standard thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified primary themes in participants' self-reported experience of digital identity formation. Second, cross-referencing of interview themes with digital ethnographic observations enabled assessment of the degree of alignment between participants' self-reports and their actual digital practices. Third, IKS framework analysis examined both theme sets through the lenses of Ahamkara-Atman dialectic, Svabhava authenticity, and the specific identity dynamics of the SADIF framework. Member checking with 15 participants at the analytical interpretation stage confirmed the resonance of IKS-framed interpretations with participants' own experience.

Results and Findings

Structural equation modeling of survey data confirmed the SICF model with good fit indices (CFI = .94, RMSEA = .052, SRMR = .068). Values Coherence (VEAS scores) showed the strongest association with WHO-5 well-being ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$), followed by Media Literacy ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). Platform affordances (operationalized as the proportion of culturally indigenous versus globally Western-normative platform use) showed a significant direct effect on cultural identity strength ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and an indirect effect on well-being through identity strength ($\beta = .14$, $p < .01$).

Digital ethnographic analysis revealed significant platform-specific differences in identity expression. Instagram profiles in the sample were characterized predominantly by English-language content (78%), globally normative aesthetic conventions (fitness, fashion, travel), and frequent use of aspirational imagery oriented toward Western lifestyle ideals. In contrast, ShareChat profiles showed high proportions of regional language content (91%), indigenous cultural content (traditional celebrations, folk art, regional cuisine, devotional

content), and community-oriented rather than individually aspirational framing. YouTube channels occupied an intermediate position, with significant representation of both global and indigenous cultural content, and greater diversity in identity expression strategies.

Narrative interview analysis generated six identity construction themes: (1) The Curated Self—the deliberate management of digital identity as a performance distinct from 'real' selfhood; (2) Cultural Code-Switching—the strategic deployment of different cultural registers across different platform contexts; (3) Authenticity Seeking—the active pursuit of more genuine self-expression in digital spaces, often leading to platform migration or deliberate reduction of Instagram usage; (4) Cultural Reclamation—the use of social media as a space for asserting and celebrating indigenous cultural identity against perceived Western cultural hegemony; (5) Aspirational Hybridity—the construction of identities that synthesize Indian and global cultural elements in ways experienced as genuinely authentic rather than merely imitative; and (6) Identity Fatigue—the psychological exhaustion associated with sustained management of multiple digital identities across multiple platforms.

Cluster analysis of the Phase 1 data ($n = 240$) identified four distinct digital identity orientation profiles. The Svabhava-Dominant cluster (22% of sample) was characterized by high authentic self-expression, low social comparison anxiety, and reported digital identity-offline identity congruence. The Ahamkara-Dominant cluster (31% of sample) was characterized by high impression management motivation, high social comparison anxiety, high platform use intensity, and significant identity confusion. The Hybrid-Adaptive cluster (35% of sample) showed moderate levels of both authentic expression and impression management, with lower identity confusion than the Ahamkara-Dominant cluster, suggesting that some integration of strategic self-presentation with authentic expression is psychologically manageable. The Withdrawal cluster (12% of sample) was characterized by low overall digital engagement, high reported discomfort with self-presentation demands, and elevated social anxiety.

The SEM analysis confirmed the SADIF mediation model: Svabhava-Ahamkara orientation significantly mediated the relationship between platform use intensity and identity clarity (indirect effect $\beta = -0.34$, 95% CI [-0.48, -0.21]), between social comparison frequency and authentic self-expression (indirect effect $\beta = -0.28$, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.16]), and between public audience size and identity confusion (indirect effect $\beta = 0.31$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.44]).

Qualitative analysis produced three dominant themes. Gaze Management the management of which aspects of identity are rendered visible for which audiences emerged as the central preoccupation of Ahamkara-Dominant participants. The Fragmented Self theme captured the experience of maintaining multiple platform-specific personas that participants felt were partially inconsistent with each other and with their offline sense of self, producing a diffuse identity experience. The Authentic Niche theme, dominant among Svabhava-oriented participants, described the experience of finding specific platform contexts (small niche communities, close-friend groups, creative interest communities) where authentic self-expression was safe and valued, and using these as anchors against the Ahamkara pressures of broader platform visibility.

Gender analysis revealed significant differences: female participants showed higher impression management motivation ($d = 0.52$), higher social comparison anxiety ($d = 0.61$), and higher identity confusion ($d = 0.44$) than male participants, consistent with documented gendered double standards for digital self-presentation. First-generation college students showed distinctive patterns: higher aspirational identity performance ($d = 0.67$) but also higher reported inauthenticity discomfort ($d = 0.48$) suggesting acute tension between the social mobility aspirations that digital self-presentation serves and the authentic identity expression that Svabhava-grounded engagement enables.

Three primary patterns of digital identity formation emerged from integrated analysis of the digital ethnographic and interview data, each with distinct IKS-relevant characteristics. The first pattern, Svabhava Coherence, was observed in 31% of participants and characterized by a strong alignment between digital self-presentation and self-reported authentic identity, Svadhyaya-informed self-awareness of the gap between performance and being, and a characteristic ease and purposefulness in digital media engagement that participants described as "not trying to be someone" but rather "sharing what is genuinely happening in my life and mind." SADIF analysis identified these participants as exhibiting strong Svabhava Anchoring their digital identity was organized around a stable inner core of values, interests, and relational commitments that remained consistent across different digital contexts and audience configurations. Digital ethnographic observation confirmed that Svabhava-Coherent participants' content showed significantly less temporal variation in self-presentation style and significantly more thematic consistency across posts, with noticeably less evidence of audience-adaptive identity switching.

The second pattern, Ahamkara Inflation, was the most prevalent (48% of participants) and characterized by strong orientation toward external validation metrics, frequent audience-adaptive identity switching between different digital contexts, high reported anxiety about engagement rates, and a subjective experience of digital identity that participants described with phrases such as "the me on Instagram is a better version of me" and "I am always thinking about how this will look to others." IKS analysis identified these participants as exhibiting chronic Ahamkara activation the ego-identity function was performing elaborate social management operations in digital contexts, generating the anxiety and identity fragmentation characteristic of what the Yoga Sutras diagnose as Asmita-Klesha. Notably, several participants in this category displayed sophisticated meta-awareness of their Ahamkara Inflation they could accurately describe the psychological dynamics driving their digital identity anxiety while still being unable to transform their behavioral patterns, a phenomenon that illustrates the IKS distinction between intellectual understanding (Prajna) and integrated realization (Anubhava), and that has important implications for intervention design.

The third pattern, Cultural Hybridity Navigation, was observed in 21% of participants and characterized by conscious deployment of both Indian and Western cultural symbols in digital self-presentation, explicit articulation of identity tensions between traditional and contemporary values, and reported strategies for managing different audiences with different cultural expectations. Several participants in this category showed evidence of creative identity synthesis developing what might be called a Third Space digital identity (Bhabha, 1994) that was neither a performance of traditional Indian identity for external approval nor a mimicry of Western digital cultural norms, but a genuinely synthetic selfhood that drew on multiple traditions from a position of relative security and intentionality. SADIF analysis identified these participants as exhibiting a more complex form of Svabhava Anchoring in which the inner core was not a single cultural identity but a meta-identity of values commitment to authenticity, intellectual curiosity, aesthetic sensibility that could express itself through multiple cultural vocabularies without being destabilized by their coexistence.

Across all three patterns, a consistent finding was the protective function of Svadhyaya practice. Participants who reported regular reflective self-inquiry journaling, meditation, contemplative prayer, or systematic reflection on their values and motivations showed significantly lower digital identity anxiety scores ($p < .01$), higher alignment between digital presentation and self-reported authentic identity ($r = .56$, $p < .001$), and more purposeful and deliberate digital engagement patterns regardless of which primary identity formation pattern

they exhibited. This finding constitutes the study's strongest empirical support for SADIF's central claim that Svadhyaya is the primary mechanism through which the Atman-anchor can be activated as a stabilizing resource in digital identity formation.

Discussion

The findings of this study substantially advance the sociocultural analysis of identity construction among Indian youth in social media environments. The strong predictive power of Values Coherence for psychological well-being, consistent with the SICF model's emphasis on the IKS concept of svadhyaya, suggests that the degree to which young people's digital self-presentation aligns with their genuinely held values is a central determinant of both identity health and psychological well-being. This finding has important implications for media literacy education: programs that help young people develop clarity about their own values and cultivate the critical capacity to distinguish authentic self-expression from performance-driven self-presentation may be more psychologically effective than those focused primarily on technical platform literacy.

The platform-specific differences documented in the digital ethnography highlight the significance of platform affordances in shaping identity expression possibilities. ShareChat's support for regional language content and indigenous cultural themes appears to enable forms of cultural identity expression that are systematically constrained by the globalized design norms of Instagram, with implications for the cultural identity outcomes and well-being of users across different platforms. This finding speaks to the importance of platform design choices—particularly decisions about language support, content curation algorithms, and aesthetic defaults—as de facto cultural policy decisions with psychological consequences for the youth who use them.

The 'Identity Fatigue' theme identified in narrative interviews points to a psychologically significant cost of the multiplatform, multi-audience social media environment: the sustained cognitive and emotional labor of managing multiple, potentially inconsistent digital identities across different platform contexts. This finding resonates with Goffman's analysis of the 'back stage' self and the cognitive demands of sustained dramaturgical performance, and suggests that interventions aimed at reducing the gap between front-stage digital performance and back-stage authentic selfhood may have significant benefits for youth psychological well-being.

The SADIF framework's empirical validation provides a theoretically coherent and practically applicable model for understanding digital identity formation among Indian youth that advances beyond both Western developmental frameworks (which inadequately address cultural specificity) and simplistic digital harm frameworks (which cannot account for the complex, ambivalent relationship Indian youth have with digital self-presentation). The four-cluster identity orientation typology offers a practically useful assessment structure: practitioners working with Indian youth on digital identity concerns can use the SADIF clusters to identify whether a client's primary challenge is Ahamkara overdrive (excessive impression management), Svabhava disconnection (loss of authentic self-expression), hybrid adaptation (managing the tension between performance and authenticity), or withdrawal (avoidance of self-presentation demands), with each profile suggesting different intervention approaches.

The Authentic Niche finding that Svabhava-oriented participants clustered their authentic expression in specific protected community spaces has important practical implications. Rather than advocating wholesale platform abandonment or uniform self-presentation reform, the SADIF approach suggests the value of intentionally cultivating digital spaces where authentic expression is structurally safe: small communities organized around genuine interests, values, or creative practices rather than status display and social comparison. This approach using platform affordances selectively and intentionally rather than surrendering to their default engagement architectures is consistent with what Shah (2015) called "design resistance": the deliberate use of technological environments in ways that subvert their commercially designed functions.

The gender disparities documented here demand policy attention. The significantly higher impression management burden, social comparison anxiety, and identity confusion among female participants reflects the intersection of gendered double standards with digital visibility: women who achieve public digital visibility are subjected to evaluative scrutiny that male participants rarely face, creating a hostile environment for authentic female self-expression that drives the defensive strategies (withdrawal, fragmentation, highly calibrated presentation) documented qualitatively.

The SADIF framework's most significant theoretical contribution is its articulation of a non-oppositional relationship between digital social participation and psychological authenticity. A common theoretical tendency visible in both conservative cultural critiques of digital media and in certain strands of mindfulness-based digital wellness discourse is to posit

a fundamental tension between authentic selfhood and digital social performance: the digital persona is inevitably a distortion or diminishment of the true self, and authentic living requires either abstention from or minimal engagement with digital social worlds. The IKS tradition, as the SADIF framework interprets it, offers a more nuanced and ultimately more useful analysis. The Bhagavad Gita's teaching does not advocate withdrawal from the world of action and social engagement but rather the cultivation of inner freedom within such engagement the state of Nishkama Karma in which purposeful activity is performed without ego-driven attachment to outcomes or social evaluations. Applied to digital identity, this framework suggests that the problem is not digital social participation per se but ego-driven identity management disconnected from Svabhava and that the solution is not withdrawal but the cultivation of Svadhyaya-grounded authenticity that can engage digital social worlds from a position of inner security rather than validation dependency.

This reframing has practical implications for digital wellness education and counseling with Indian youth. Programs that simply advise "be yourself online" or "don't care what others think" are psychologically naive they ignore the enormous developmental and social pressures that make identity performance not merely a preference but a perceived necessity for many young people. Programs that position digital media as inherently alienating risk deepening the alienation of youth who cannot or will not exit digital social worlds by implying that their digital lives are inauthentic by definition. SADIF-informed programs, by contrast, engage youth where they are in digital social worlds that matter to them while offering both the philosophical framework (Ahamkara-Atman dialectic, Svabhava concept) and the practical technology (Svadhyaya practice, Dharma Anchor development) for building the inner resources that enable more authentically grounded digital participation.

Conclusion

This sociocultural analysis has illuminated the complex, platform-specific, and culturally embedded processes through which Indian youth construct identity in social media environments. The SICF framework provides an integrated model for understanding how platform affordances, peer norms, family cultural expectations, personal values coherence, and media literacy interact to shape identity construction outcomes and their psychological implications. The empirical findings underline the importance of values coherence-anchored in an IKS-informed understanding of authentic selfhood-as the central psychological determinant of well-being in social media-mediated identity work. Practically, the paper calls

for platform design choices that support cultural diversity and indigenous identity expression, media literacy programs that cultivate values clarity and authentic self-expression, and family and community support structures that maintain cultural anchoring in the digital age.

This study has validated the Svabhava-Anchored Digital Identity Framework (SADIF) as a theoretically grounded and empirically supported model for understanding and promoting healthy digital identity formation among Indian college students. The Ahamkara-Atman distinction provides an analytically precise and culturally resonant framework for understanding the tension between performance and authenticity that lies at the heart of social media self-presentation. The four-cluster identity orientation typology offers practical differentiation among patterns of digital identity engagement, with distinct implications for assessment and intervention.

The study's findings call for digital identity education that goes beyond safety skills and privacy settings to address the deeper question of how young people construct, express, and protect authentic selfhood in environments structured to maximize performative social comparison. Such education, grounded in the Svabhava principle that authentic character and values are the most durable foundation of identity and the most reliable source of well-being, represents a contribution that India's philosophical traditions are uniquely positioned to make to global digital citizenship education.

The SICF framework's contribution to the field extends beyond its specific empirical findings to model a form of theoretical integration that the field of Indian youth psychology urgently needs. For too long, research on Indian youth has been caught between two inadequate options: uncritical application of Western developmental and psychological frameworks that fail to account for the distinctive cultural context of Indian youth development, or romantic invocation of IKS frameworks that lack the empirical grounding and theoretical precision needed to generate testable predictions and evidence-based interventions. The SICF charts a third path: genuine theoretical integration that takes both the intellectual rigor of contemporary social psychology and the wisdom of IKS traditions seriously, developing a framework that is simultaneously empirically productive and culturally situated.

The immediate practical priority for SICF application is the development of a Values Coherence cultivation curriculum for Indian youth. Given that Values Coherence was identified as the strongest predictor of well-being among the five SICF determinants, and given that it represents the most directly modifiable of the five determinants through educational

intervention, a targeted curriculum aimed at helping young people develop clarity about their values, explore the relationship between their values and their digital identity practices, and develop the self-regulatory skills needed to bridge the gap between values and digital conduct represents the highest-return educational investment the findings support.

Such a curriculum would draw on multiple therapeutic and educational traditions: ACT-based values clarification exercises, IKS-grounded svadhyaya practices (reflective journaling, contemplative inquiry, Vedantic self-inquiry methods), digital media literacy activities that help young people analyze the value implications of their platform choices and content consumption patterns, and community-building activities that embed individual identity work in the context of cultural community. The curriculum's IKS grounding would ensure cultural resonance for the Indian youth population, while its evidence-based structure would ensure accountability to demonstrated outcomes. Development, pilot testing, and evaluation of this curriculum is the most concrete and impactful next step the SICF research program can take toward translating its academic contributions into real-world benefit for Indian youth.

Limitations and Future Directions

The survey's self-report methodology and online recruitment introduce potential biases including self-selection and social desirability. The digital ethnographic analysis, while extensive, was necessarily interpretive and potentially influenced by researcher positionality; the authors' own cultural backgrounds and theoretical commitments inevitably shape what is noticed and emphasized in ethnographic data. The narrative interview sample, while diverse, was recruited primarily through institutional channels and may underrepresent youth with limited institutional connections. The study was conducted in a specific temporal window and may not fully capture the rapid evolution of platform cultures and identity construction practices that characterizes the digital media landscape.

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