



## A qualitative analysis of social networking usage

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Social networking sites (SNSs) are emerging trends that deeply influence the societal interactions and psychological well-being.

**Aims & Objectives:** To study the nature of prevalence and dynamics of excessive social networking among the Indian youth.

**Materials & Methods:** A qualitative method research design following content analysis and thematic analysis were used to triangulate this research and thus incorporate a dimension of the 'emic' principle by immersion in the setting. Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were conducted on a sample of 100 undergraduate college students from University of Delhi who actively interacted on SNSs.

**Results:** Results of the study indicate that most youngsters begin social networking at 14.6 years, being influenced by gender and nature of family. The average time spent was 3.6 hours daily, which was effected by degree of parental regulation. Facebook was the most preferred SNS for functions of chatting and making friends. Most of the participants were found to carry social networking at night, interact with the opposite sex, have interest in electronic gadgets, ignore daily activities, hide their online tasks from others, use SNS secretly and feel frustrated in its absence.

**Conclusion:** Qualitative themes of social acceptance, physical maladjustment and tool for career growth were found to be the most common experiences around social networking.

**Key words:** *Adolescents, Facebook, Social networking sites (SNSs)*

### Introduction

Nowadays, social networking sites (SNSs) are one of the most importing medium of communication among the adolescents. Time spent on facebook by college students has varied in several studies, but has aggregated around 30 to 50 minutes [1, 2]. Further, a social capital divide was observed with teenagers (13-19 years) having larger networks of friends compared to older users (above 60 years) of MySpace. Engagement in online social networking (SN) is a source for seeking support, approval and friendships for a young adolescent. Study on the attachment patterns of youngsters reveal the use of SNS for casual affiliations among more socially distant people by bridging the social gaps [3]. Positive associations between the number of SNS

friends, supportive interactions, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction were found [4]. Social networking sites also help people for developing romantic relationships among their peer groups. Tagging one's partner in status updates, appearing together in photographs, and listing similar interests on profiles are indicative of self-expansion processes typically found in romantic relationships [5]. Online networks seem to connect people in a person-to-person manner which is more direct and interpersonal. The levels of verbal and affective intimacy are found to be positively correlated with public-posting frequency on popular SNS [6]. In this regard it can be said that activities like writing updates, tagging photographs etc. serve to meet the social-emotional needs of the individual.

Some social aspects like family structure, parental style, family membership, and communication among family members play a vital role for the adolescents' web usage. A negative correlation between optimal parenting and IAD (Internet Addiction Disorder) has been revealed [7]. Adequate parenting serves as a catalyst for regulating the social and emotional needs of the adolescents, which may have otherwise sought a fulfilment in an online space. Gender difference and purpose of use of social networking are other important variables. Women are found to be frequent users of text messaging, social media, and online video calls [8, 1]. In their study observed that Men were observed to use social networking sites for forming new relationships while women used it more for relationship maintenance [9].

Social media open up multiple options to add a new dimension to learning and knowledge processes. Student population is more likely to use SNS for educational purposes [10]. In a study [11], it was found that 1/5<sup>th</sup> participants to exchange study-related knowledge through StudiVZ. The use of social networking is also different from culture to culture. Comparison between social networking site in a collectivistic culture (e.g. China) and an individualistic culture (e.g. United States) has been done [12]. Results suggested that US participants spent more time and had more friends in SNSs than Chinese participants. In collectivistic cultures the importance of the family, friends and one's groups may be partly responsible for lesser use of SNSs. Although most of the Indian families are collectivistic in nature but increasing urbanization is resulting in more individualistic societies.

## Materials & Methods

### Objective:

1. To study the nature of prevalence of excessive social networking among the Indian youth.
2. To ascertain the qualitative themes emerging from the dynamics of participation in SNS.

*Materials:* There were three basic tools adopted to gather information. A self-constructed questionnaire consisting of questions based on basic demographic information about the participants such as age, gender, usage of SNS, nature of family etc. The second questionnaire was based on Kimberly Young's criteria of internet addiction [13]. The third instrument was a self-designed interview schedule constructed to carry out semi-structured interviews. It comprised of 21 questions to gather information spread over diverse spheres of the lives of participants such as personal sphere (emotions, thoughts, preferences, identity), family sphere

(degree of interaction, nature of relationships with family members), work sphere (school & college life, interest and performance at work) and online usage sphere (online activities, features of SNS). It was ensured that the questions were open-ended in nature to elicit a descriptively rich data.

*Sample:* A total of 100, (57 males and 43 females) college students from University of Delhi, New Delhi, India were participated in the present study. All of them belonged to the age group of 17-20 years and the middle-class income group. It was also ensured that all the students used SNS for at least 2 hours, as the minimum criteria of excessive social networking based on past literature. The sample was chosen using random sampling (table of random numbers) to better represent the average usage among youngsters in New Delhi.

*Procedure:* This study was carried in two stages of qualitative analysis. After the selection of the sample, all the 100 participants responded to the above mentioned questionnaires to provide information about demographic as well as social-networking activities. After content analysis, 60 participants were chosen for the next stage of personal interviews based on their better fit with the criteria of excessive uses of social networking. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out in a non-intrusive manner and non-judgemental manner. Each interview conversation was recorded and transcribed to elicit a detailed account of the sessions. This was then exposed to thematic analysis as discussed below.

*Analysis of Information:* A mixed method approach of analysis was adopted to facilitate a closer understanding of the lives of college students using excessive social networking. Content analysis was done to determine the means, percentages, frequencies and standard deviations of several variables related to the preliminaries, demographics and internet usage of participants. These were plotted graphically for a better visual representation of the findings. Furthermore, the interview data was subjected to thematic analysis to discover the underlying themes from the narratives of the participants.

## Results & Discussion

The results of the study included both content analysis and thematic analysis, as follows:

*Content Analysis:* Social network sites (SNS) have become an important social milieu that enables interpersonal communication by allowing users to share and create information. The first objective of the study was to assess the nature of use of social networking among college students. The descriptive

analysis of the responses on two questionnaires revealed that the average family size was 5.26, with a mean of 7.16 in joint families and 4.45 in nuclear homes. This reflects how majority of the respondents were closer to a nuclear setup with few members at home. Majority of respondents (70%) belonged to nuclear families whereas only 30 % were from joint families (Figure: 1). An insufficient mental and emotional support in the absence of parents at home could contribute to excessive social networking. Reduced parental supervision and control may adversely affect children's social, psychological and emotional problems [14]. Moreover, the results revealed that the average age of starting use of social networking was 14.6 years for the entire sample, consistent with the 15-17 years beginning age found by Lenhart [15]. Interestingly, this age was as low as 14.1 years for males and 15.2 for females. Cultural stereotypes associated with gender in the Indian society become evident. While the degree of freedom and autonomy being extended to men is far more, women are meant to be preserved from interactions and influences of the outer world. The nature of family also seemed to play an important part in providing the appropriate layout, resources and infrastructure for online interaction. The age of starting social networking was slightly lower for nuclear families (14.4 years) than for joint families (15 years). Parental job status such as either parent or both parent working condition have also impact on children's uses of social networking. The present study indicates for 80% of the participants, only a single parent (usually father) was working whereas for 20% of participants both the parents were working. Indian families are predominantly experienced as patriarchal systems with men being the head of the family, responsible for all important decisions as well as running the household. This social norm was, in turn, associated with the degree of daily online usage. The mean usage was found to be 3.6 hours, suggesting that most of the participants were engaged with SNS excessively in accordance with Duggan & Brenner [16]. In case of single parent working, the usage was slightly lower at 3.5 hours whereas it was found to be 4.1 hours for both parents working. This reflects how parent regulation and control influence youngsters a great deal, thereby impacting their online usage. Feelings of boredom or loneliness could be possibly construed in case of both working parents, thereby making the students resort to seeking friendships or social approvals online. In such scenario one could imagine how social networking plays a critical role in meeting basic everyday needs of conformity, belongingness and perhaps even self-esteem.

The study also revealed information about usage preferences of social networking sites. Table: 1 clearly depicts that Facebook topped the list with 100% usage, it was followed by Twitter with 43% and Whatsapp with 26%. Several lesser known SNS were Vonice (1% users), Indyarock, Tumbler, Minicup & Gtalk (all with 2% users each). The top three purposes for which SNS were used were chatting, making friends and news with 52%, 37% and 15% user preference respectively. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe [17] affirmed that most of the adolescents use social networking as a medium to build and maintain friendships. The least important functions that SNS sites served were updating profile, flirting, reading blogs and work with only 2% preference for each category. These findings clearly suggest that late adolescents use SNS for making new friends and spending most of their time in strengthening their sense of belongingness among the peer group. From the present study, it was also found that besides social networking, gaming topped the list with 48% users, followed by listening music or watching movies with 38% users and surfing with 35% users. On the other hand, the least preferred activities were participating in quizzes or surveys (1%), blogging and shopping (both at 5%). This probably suggests that youngsters had an orientation towards tasks that were more stimulating than the ones that demanded any reflection. Several other variables (Figure: 2) pertaining to the nature of use of social networking were studied closely. Time of internet usage was one significant variable, which revealed that 90% of the participants indulged in social networking during night or late evening hours, whereas only 10% used it during the day time. From a survey [18], it was found that 71% of people use their mobile phone for the use of social networking at night. This implies towards a sense of privacy that they want to maintain with lesser distractions during the evening hours. Furthermore, one could possibly draw a link between time of usage and gender interaction on these SNS. Again, 90% of the participants also had or preferred to have interactions with members of the opposite sex. Though, being late adolescents they are developmentally predisposed to seek greater exchanges with the opposite gender, however, it is interesting to foresee its relation with net usage. Internet also serves a medium where free and open interactions can take place between members of various groups and communities. The very existence of the screen provides an anonymous shield behind which private aspects of one's psyche could be expressed. However, out of this group, 23% formed online relationships, while a majority (77%) of participants refrained from developing personal associations. This suggests that internet served as

an important tool for exploring peer memberships or interacting about issues which are otherwise repressed silently. While online spaces become

fertile areas where relationships could breed, at the same time, people also had considerable inhibitions in trusting the authenticity and longevity of these

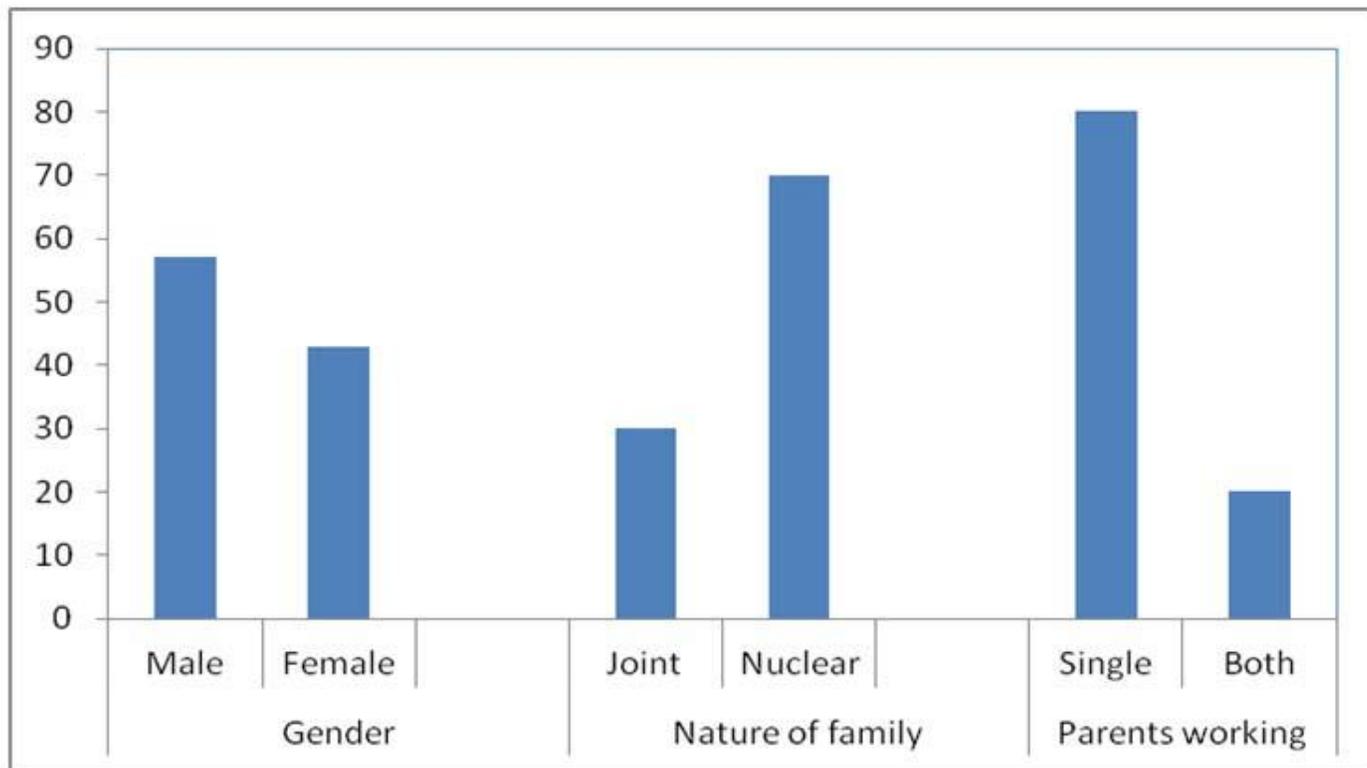
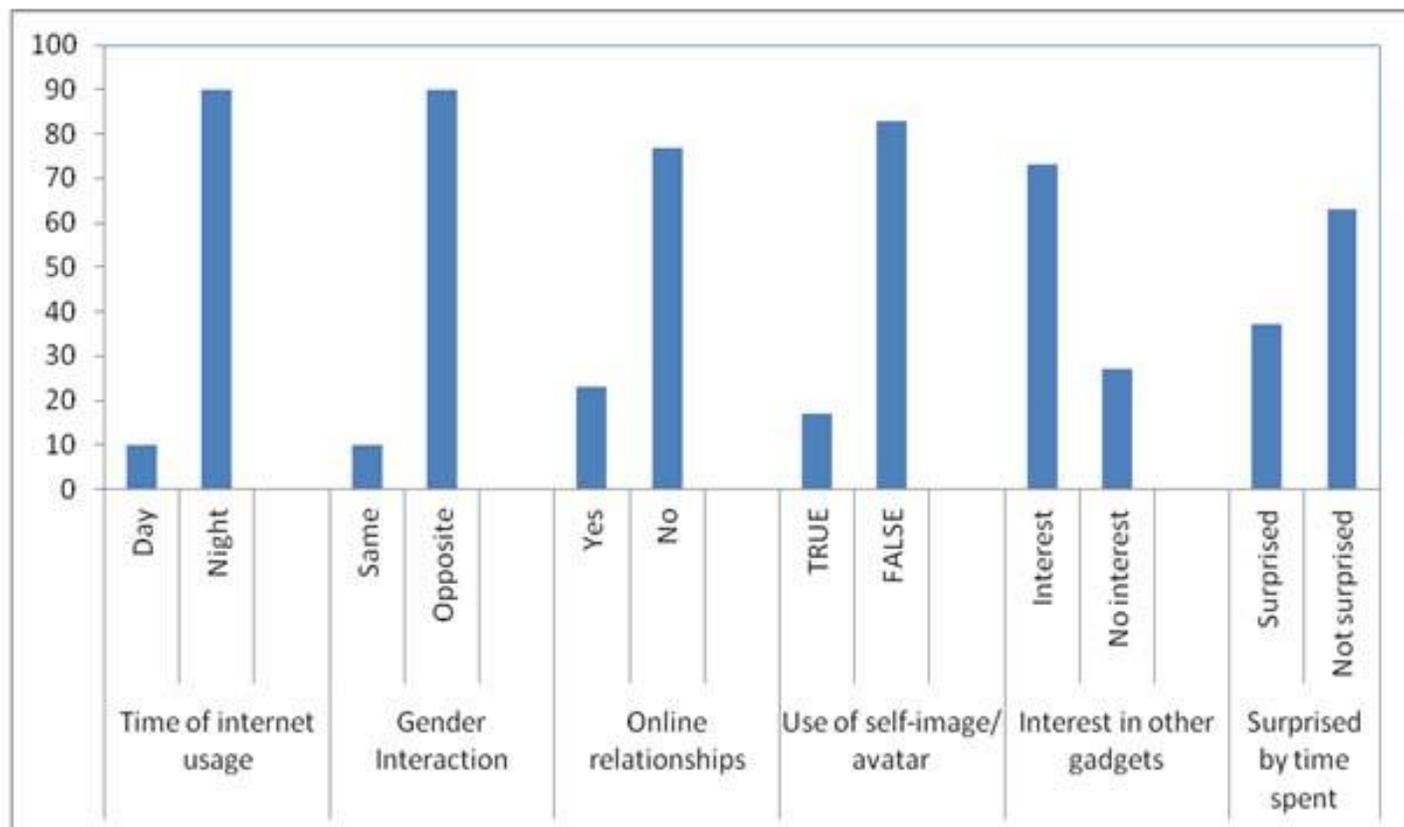


Figure 1: Demographic details of the sample

Table: 1. Percentage frequencies based on SNS preference, function and online activities

Preferred SNS's	Usage frequency	Functions in SNS's	Usage frequency	Other online activities	Usage frequency
Facebook	100	Chatting	52	Gaming	48
Twitter	43	Making friends	37	Music / Movies	38
Whats app	26	News	15	Surfing	35
Googleplus	20	Entertainment	7	Chatting	18
Linkedin	18	Sharing pictures	7	Gathering information	17
Yahoo	7	Spend free time	5	Mailing	13
We chat	7	Games	3	Downloading	10
Skype	7	Work	2	Shopping	5
Orkut	7	Reading blogs	2	Blogging	5
Instagram	5	Flirting	2	Quiz/Surveys	3
Viber	3	Updating profile	2		
Gtalk	2				
Minicup	2				
Tumblr	2				
Indyarocks	2				
Vonice	1				



**Figure 2: Relevant variables depicting nature of social networking**

relationships. Perhaps it was also associated with issues of deception that were perceived so commonly by the participants. These findings are further related with the next variable of 'use of false self-image or avatar'. A majority of members (83%) confessed that they preferred using a false representation of themselves while talking to people or making new friends at SNS. While use of this invalid information seemed to make them feel more secure, it also acted as a defence against the possibly high level of risk that youngsters foresee in these virtual interactions. To add to the excessiveness of social networking, 73% individuals were interested in other electronic gadgets and 63% were not surprised by the amount of time they spent in social networking.

The responses on the Internet addiction questionnaire constituted seven variables which showed that 50% students preferred real and virtual lives each (Figure: 3). This reflects how half of the population of excessive users had an inclination towards a strong sense of preoccupation about internet activities. While a majority of participants (78%) used social networking sites excessively daily ranging from 2-4 hours, about 22% of them had extreme usage of 5 hours and above daily. From an Australian family survey [19] it was also found that most of the adolescent aged 15-17 years used social networking for more than 2 hours daily.

This reflects how approximately a quarter of the excessive population had an inclination towards addictive processes. Further the result suggests that 82% users had more friends in their online profile than in real life which points to the changing meaning of friendship, as facilitated by the quick gen Y. Another interesting finding can be stated that 72% students ignored their daily activities like eating food, socializing with family or doing college work in order to meet their needs for social networking. This online engagement, by a large chunk of population, at the expense of their everyday chores is a cause of concern for parents, teachers as well as psychologists to regulate controls and define norms pertaining to online usage. Several leading engineering institutes in India have been grappling with the adverse effect of fully-equipped-wifi-campuses, thereby restricting the use by students. The result also indicates that 67% of the group admitted to hiding their online time from friends and family and 90% confessed to using social networking secretly when told not to do so. This alarming numbers raise our attention to the changing trends among the Indian youth. The notion of 'Internet addiction' is still fairly new and needs urgent attention of educators as well as clinicians towards its diagnosis, management and application.

This addictive orientation is further supported by the findings of the next variable that determines the degree of frustration experienced in the lack of access to internet. A majority of 85% participants admitted to feeling frustrated when they could not be online or login to their social networking profile.

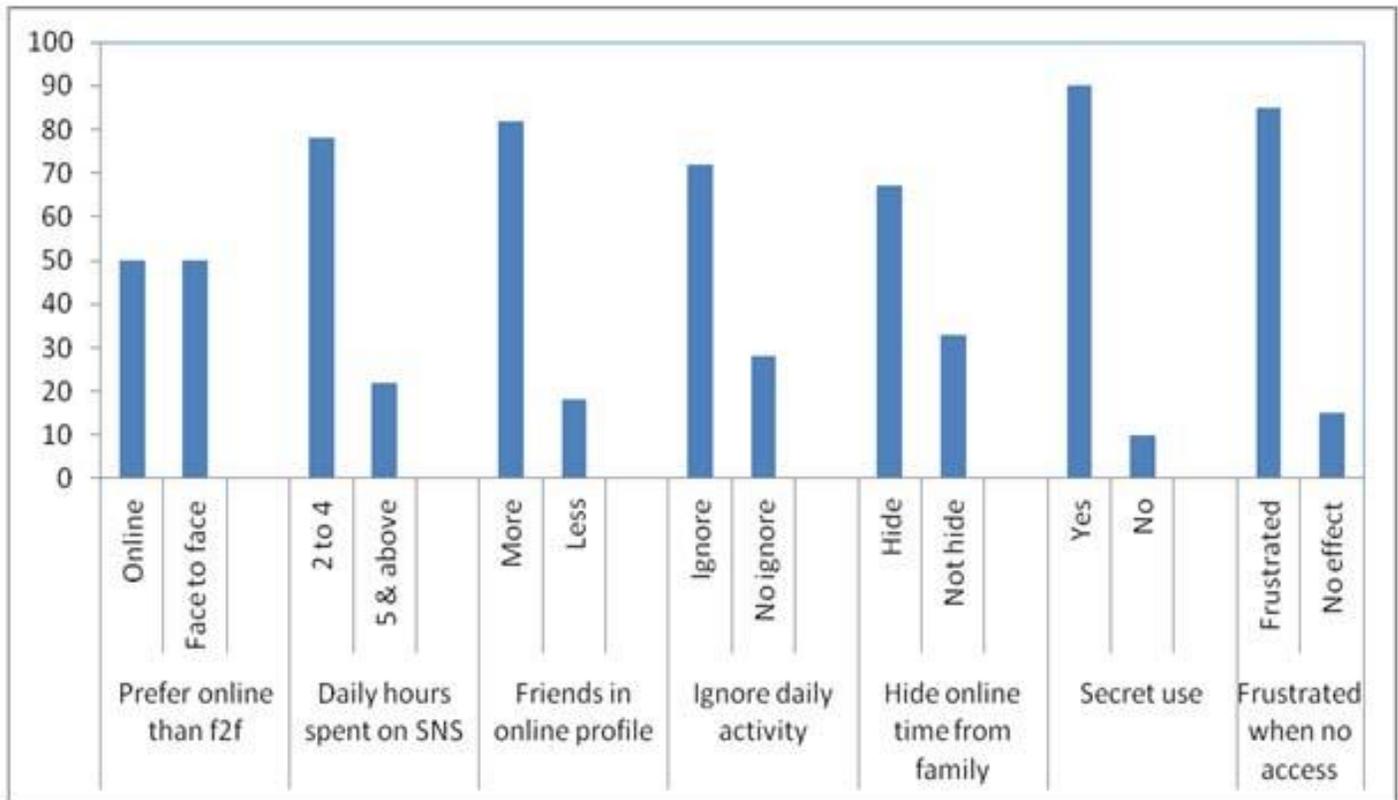
*Thematic Analysis:* The second objective of the study was to discover the qualitative dynamics of excessive social networking using thematic analysis. From the total sample (N=100), sixty participants were interviewed,

for which the narrations were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Thematic analysis was used to derive themes relevant to the topic of study (Table: 2). The foremost theme was a 'sense of social acceptance' that was pronounced in among 84% respondents. Many youngsters also try to fit in with a community or a setting to obtain a sense of peer membership and feel popular. Internet has now become a medium that disseminates norms and ideologies, providing skills necessary for participating within one's own community and adding to the social and cultural continuity [20]. Online interactions also facilitated assertiveness and confidence-building, and helped deal with the feelings of social inhibition. Social self-esteem is also enhanced by the use of social networking sites [21].

The next theme was 'Physical maladjustment', in which 76% participants reporting several somatic complaints as a result of excessive social networking. Findings suggest an inverse relation between the intensity of internet use and patterns of health, sleep and physical activity [22, 23]. With a majority of three-fourth population regularly suffering from irregularities in physical health, the compromised health at a young age of 17-20 years becomes alarming. This reflects how the body mechanism, endurance and wellness are being ignored, thereby making even the younger lot more vulnerable to disease. Social networking also emerged as a 'tool for career growth or expansion of ideas' for 68% respondents. Many people these days use social networking websites for professional growth, facilitating the flow of ideas and information. Internet reshapes the context within which individuals pursue their career and acts as a medium for the delivery of career support [24]. Collaborative and peer-to-peer learning were common benefits from SNSs, particularly for Indian research students [25]. SNS use was found to have a positive association with ICT innovativeness [26] and interest in application of other gadgets and

machinery among excessive social networking users. About 60% of the sample showed signs of 'problematic internet use or a possibility towards developing internet addiction' in accordance to the definition of internet addiction by Young [13]. Social networking provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling the basic human need for social connection, however, rather than enhancing well-being, an excessive usage may undermine it [27]. Most of the participants used internet for hours on phones, sharing how they can't imagine a day without being active in SNS. SNS use has been negatively associated with efficiency and productivity in the academic setting [28, 29]. Tolerance, salience and relapse were the three addictive components common among generation Y [30]. This alarming trend raises some concern about diagnosis, treatment, relationship between lifestyle changes, intra-psychic conflicts; nature of inter-personal relationships, work and identity. A psychological sense of 'disconnection with family' was another interesting theme that was found to be common among 56% of the college students. While a certain emotional distancing and communication divide is expected to be fairly common observation among late adolescents, who are expected to be more absorbed among their peers, it surely stood out as a critical theme in this study. In a study by Kross, it was found that people who use more social networking have lower life satisfaction, feel lonely and interact lesser with their families [27]. This distanced relationship at home possibly creates a greater urge to seek a sense of belongingness among virtual others. Moreover, internet use for coping purposes was associated with family cohesion [31].

Moreover, 'open self expression', the next theme was reflected in about 40% of the participants. On SNS, external feedback from peers may help individuals to clarify his or her sense of self, thereby increasing the likelihood of people to be true about themselves [32]. This may also be related to the feature of anonymity and lack of face-to-face interaction [33]. Several participants shared how they actively uploaded their photos, status, and other details on their social networking profiles. This self-disclosure of thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes, typically happens when one continues to build their relationship. In online spaces, however, the public and private divide disappears to permit a greater degree of sharing to take place with lesser risks as compared to real life [34].



**Figure 3: Frequency distribution of variables based on internet addiction**

Interacting within ones' community does seem to reinforce a 'sense of identity formation', our next theme, which was found to be prevalent among 36% of the college students. Young adults in this study were found to use SNS to express their identity by creating self-representing images, building an interest and sustaining friendships. The role of virtual peer interaction in the development of personal, social, and gender identities was investigated in the cultural context of MySpace [35]. These virtual images introduce feedback mechanisms by which emerging adults can legitimize their selfhood. Online space in SNS provides an opportunity for coping with a state of role confusion termed as 'identity moratorium' by developing ideologies. Furthermore, this interactive space often tends to enhance the positive self views of individuals [36]. SNS use was associated with narcissism-promoting activities such as having as many SNS friends as possible, wanting their SNS friends to know what they were doing, believing their SNS friends were interested in what they are doing, and having their SNS profiles project a positive image [37]. SNS use also seemed to foster 'emotional instability' among 32% of the youth. It is connoted as outbursts of anger or

frustration, when in conflict with a person or situation. Such emotional experiences were particularly experienced by youngsters who were in online relationships. While, SNS made friendships easier and expressions opener, it also seemed to bring to the threshold the inherent fragility of relationships and emotionality. This highlighted the participants' emotional dependency that online interaction seemed to aid in. It has been found that person having high emotional instability from the Big Five factors, were more frequent users of SNS to expand their contacts and form new bonds [38].

'False self portrayals' was another theme existent among 32% of the sample population. This suggests that about one-third of the Indian youngsters used untrue images, pictures or names for self-representations. Increased usage of social networking is also associated with increased risk and vulnerabilities encountered over internet. Those seeking a relationship online were at greatest risk of threat and disclosed the greatest amount of highly sensitive and potentially stigmatizing information [39]. False self-images are also part attempts to reflect an ideal and authentic self [40].

Table: 2. Excerpts and frequencies corresponding to thematic analysis

S.No	Qualitative Theme	Frequency	Excerpt
1.	Social Acceptance	84	<i>"I don't have so many friends outside. I am a lonely guy... But when I go online, life changes altogether. Its really interesting. I get to connect with friends, share snaps, play games. I love chatting.... with girls".</i>
2.	Physical Maladjustment	76	<i>"I have back ache most of the time and cervical problems just because of this. I often have difficulty sleeping... I got spectacles within one year of SNS use. I kept sitting in one position and gained a lot of weight".</i>
3.	Tool for Career Growth or Expansion of Ideas	68	<i>"I use LinkedIn to find opportunities. You get to build your network". "I have study groups where we exchange our notes, timetable. I want to be updated about the world for academic purposes".</i>
4.	Problematic Internet Use	60	<i>"I never went to playing because I needed to do facebook chatting. I have missed my tuitions, food and college. I hate it when there's a technical problem"; "It has become a part of my life and I can't avoid it unless I am alive. I continuously use it in class or home. I trace a wifi hotspot, go to a cafe or friend's place. I just can't be without it".</i>
5.	Disconnection with Family	56	<i>"My family members complain that you are all the time on your phone. We sometimes fight because of it. I really get irritated and feel misunderstood when they tell me such things"; "I don't feel close to my parents. They don't know me... seriously".</i>
6.	Open Self Expression	40	<i>"I feel so comfortable in putting my thoughts. Nobody is there to judge you. There are no hesitations. I was never as open about myself".</i>
7.	Sense of Identity Formation	36	<i>"Internet has enabled me to follow my passion in photography. I am surer of my potentials now"; "I can be in a comfortable zone to commit. Reality is fraught with too many ups and downs".</i>
8.	Emotional Unstability	32	<i>"I used to talk to a person in Canada. Chatting late night was cool. Then things went wrong and I felt extremely frustrated. I am interacting with an interesting fellow these days. I like it".</i>
9.	False Self-Portrayals	32	<i>"When I was in school, I used to hide my age to have a facebook account. People even fake their gender. You can be easily fooled. We see people lying all the time so I don't think it's such a big deal, you know".</i>
10.	Stressful Life Experiences	24	<i>"There are worries at so many ends. At home, with friends and in college. Life isn't so easy".</i>
11.	Exposure to Cybercrime	16	<i>"I was a victim of harassment when I was involved with a girl online. She turned out to be a trick by a boy from class. I was emotionally shattered. My account was hacked and all my personal information was presented in a negative light and flashed to all my friends".</i>
12.	Emotional Support	10	<i>"I feel very lonely. I have very few friends outside. My parents don't understand me and I am usually sitting inside my room. My online mates. They listen to my problems; I can share my worries and feel relieved".</i>

Further, 24% college students were found to be prone to 'stressful life experiences'. Lazarus observed that stress occurs when an individual perceives that the demands of an external situation are beyond his or her perceived ability to cope with them [41]. In among one-fourth of excessive social networking users, a multitude of anxiety-provoking situations seemed to reinforce the degree of stress they experienced. This came from several factors such as poor academic performance, distant relationship with parents, identity crisis, physical discomforts etc. Excessive social networking has found to have many negative effects on an individual's social well being like loneliness, depression, and stress [42]. This is an "Internet Paradox" i.e. a technology that would theoretically increase communication, could also have negative social and psychological effects. 'Exposure to cybercrime' was a theme prevalent in about 16% of the participants. These experiences varied from cyber-bullying, stalking to hacking. A high risk of fraud is also involved on SNS that puts valuable personal information at risk. SNS have been criticized for serving as a breeding ground for cyber-bullying and harassment by strangers [43]. Moreover, due to information revolution in the e-commerce field another dark side has emerged where online transactions are hacked. The study also revealed that 10% participants sought 'emotional support' through SNS's. Many studies associate loneliness and depression with a pathological use of social networking. Lonely users are more likely to seek emotional support online, find more satisfaction with online versus offline friends, and experience more disturbances in their daily lives [42]. It may be true for individuals who were troubled, experienced high degree of stress, vulnerability and instability. Thus, a therapeutic dimension is a small but essential part of these online spaces.

## Conclusion

Social networking sites (SNSs) are altering the way individuals communicate. These online environments allow users to make friends, network with colleagues, and share their personal views with others. The current study attempted to study the prevalence and dynamics of excessive social networking among the Indian youth. It was observed that most Indian students begin to network socially around mid-adolescence. Gender, nature of family and working parents were found to be relevant factors in their online usage. The researchers in this study found that Facebook was the most preferred SNS for functions of chatting and making friends. Gaming, watching movies and listening to music were enjoyed the most other than social networking. Most of the participants were found to carry social networking at night, interact with the opposite sex, have interest in electronic

gadgets, ignore daily activities, hide their online tasks from others, use SNS secretly and feel frustrated in its absence. Using thematic analysis, social acceptance, physical maladjustment and tool for career growth were found to be the most common experiences around social networking.

The contributions of this study lie in presenting an authentic triangulation of research methods to study the realm of social networking; which has been largely addressed through a closed quantitative approach. Contextualization, immersion in the setting and 'emic' principle are some relevant instruments in qualitative research that ensure the acquisition of data that is rich and descriptive. It is this grounding in the local milieu and culture that makes our study thorough in the assimilation of textual material. This study also forms a background for future researchers and clinicians to better understand the phenomena of internet addiction and identity processes, as it exists in the Indian scenario, thus creating scope for effective management.

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