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Usage Of Social Media Platforms By Students In Rural And Semi-Urban Colleges In India: An Overview

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Abstract:

Social networking sites (SNS) have transformed communication and education globally, yet there is limited knowledge about their adoption in India's rural and semi-urban university environments. This paper explores students' adoption of SNS in these areas from a theoretical and conceptual perspective, utilizing existing literature on digital divide theory, technology acceptance models (TAM), and socio-cultural views on technology usage. The research thoroughly examines the various socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructure factors influencing students' use of SNS in educational environments beyond urban areas. The research aims to demonstrate the possibilities and constraints of social networking sites as means for academic involvement, identity creation, and social capital growth by applying existing models to the rural and semi-urban settings of India. To establish a basis for future empirical studies and policy actions, the paper concludes by proposing a conceptual framework for understanding SNS adoption in marginalized university environments.

Keywords: **Adoption in Higher Education. Digital Divide, Social Networking Sites (SNS),Technology**

1. INTRODUCTION

India’s digital landscape is transforming rapidly. As per the current data of the Ministry of Communications (2024), as of March 2024, 95.15 % of its Approximately6,44,000 villages had access to 3G/4G mobile connectivity, and rural regions accounted for 398.35 million of the 954.4 million internet subscribers nationwide. Meanwhile, India hosts roughly 491 million social media identities, with users spending an average of 2 hours 28 minutes per day on such platforms (Howe, 2025). As per Deepika (2024), among university students more broadly, studies report that nearly 90 % maintain social networking accounts and about 80 % use them actively. Against this backdrop, the adoption of social networking sites (SNS) in rural and semi-urban university contexts merits careful study. These settings contend with infrastructure constraints, socio-economic disparities, and varying digital literacies. Thus, this review aims to critically examine existing research to synthesise trends, uncover gaps, and propose paths for future investigation into SNS adoption by students outside India's urban cores.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Global Landscape of SNS Adoption

Globally, social networking sites (SNS) have become integral to higher education, yet patterns of adoption vary significantly across countries. Bartosik-Purgat, Filimon, and Kiygi-Calli (2017) explored the SNS utilisation in the educational settings of China, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. In cross-national research on 1,376 respondents, they discovered that socio-demographic factors, including gender, age, and education level, are significant contributors to the adoption patterns. The younger students (especially between 21 and 30 years old) and the undergraduates were more inclined to use SNS in the course of their studies, including accessing study materials, interacting with peers, or studying foreign languages. Cultural variation was also mentioned in the study, with Facebook and YouTube prevailing in most of the Western environment, but countries such as China are strongly dependent on regional services like Renren or Youku. The results highlight that the currently adopted global platform dominance and local socio-cultural conditions determine the adoption of SNS in education.

In line with this, Purvis, Rodger, and Beckingham (2020) share the UK experience where lecturers in a post-92 university explained SNS adoption as conditioned by the interdependent personal, pedagogical, and institutional factors. Although most teachers perceived the advantages of social media in engaging with students, collaborating and developing professionally, they identified digital confidence, time investment, and institutional direction as barriers to its extensive use. Their research noted that the use of social media in the teaching process has been a piecemeal affair, mostly fuelled by personal fans as opposed to institutional planning. Collectively, these analyses indicate that the adoption of SNS in higher education is common but not even across the globe, mediated by demographics, cultural situations, and institutional support.

2.2 Indian Context of SNS Adoption

India has experienced a radical change in the digital space with a high rate of mobile adoption and access to low-cost connectivity. Putta, Kohir, and Chavan (2022) point out the democratisation of the internet in 2016 as the so-called Jio effect, during which millions of rural and semi-urban young people were introduced to free 4G services. In 2021, India had 749 million internet users, and this country is the second-largest online market in the world. But the spread, notwithstanding, was unequally distributed: the rural rate of penetration was only 29 per cent compared with 51 per cent nationwide, and by state, there were enormous inequalities. The gender differences are also acute, as the probability of Indian women possessing a mobile phone and mobile internet is 15% and 33% lower than for men, respectively, and shows the firmly established disparities in access and usage.

In a study of rural university students, Savita Kumari (2016) discovered that even semi-urban settings had become dominated by social media use. Her research at Indira Gandhi University found that over 70% of the rural students had at least one social media account, mostly Facebook and WhatsApp. Undergraduates (18-22 years) were the most likely to use the service, reporting going to social media seeking more than just entertainment, but also peer communication and casual academic support. However, the study highlighted infrastructural constraints such as intermittent connectivity, limited device ownership, and affordability of data packs, which restricted regular engagement compared to urban peers. This reflects how rural adoption, while significant, remains mediated by structural and socio-economic limitations.

Findings from NCERT's Journal of Indian Education illustrate how state-level disparities in educational access intersect with digital engagement. Singh (2022) documented the condition of education in Manipur, where literacy rates rose from 11% in 1951 to nearly 77% in 2011, but dropout rates remain high in rural hill districts. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for primary schools exceeded 112%, yet higher secondary GER lagged at just 63.5%, indicating attrition in advanced education. These systemic challenges—poor infrastructure, proxy teaching, and geographic isolation—directly shape students' access to technology and SNS. In such settings, digital adoption is uneven, often determined by whether institutions and households can provide stable connectivity and digital literacy.

Government surveys confirm how rural youth are increasingly integrated into the digital ecosystem. According to the National Sample Survey Office (2025), nearly 96.8% of rural youth (15–29 years) reported using mobile phones in the last three months, and 92.7% accessed the internet during that period. Smartphone ownership reached 95.5% in rural areas, narrowing the urban-rural gap significantly. The survey also found that digital financial literacy was high, with 99.5% of rural youth who engaged in online banking using UPI platforms. These findings indicate a robust baseline of device access, suggesting that SNS adoption is not constrained by hardware availability but by socio-cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural barriers.

Complementing these statistics, DataReportal's Digital (2025): India shows that 806 million individuals were online by early 2025, representing 55.3% penetration nationally. Social media users numbered over 491 million, with average daily usage of 2 hours 28 minutes. Platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube dominated rural and semi-urban contexts due to their visual, low-text interfaces, aligning with India's multilingual demographics. Importantly, mobile-first usage patterns prevail, as 95% of users access SNS exclusively via smartphones rather than desktops. This reinforces the idea that adoption is inseparable from India's unique mobile-first digital culture, where inexpensive data packs and widespread smartphone diffusion make SNS accessible to students in rural and semi-urban areas.

The ASER (2023) [Annual Status of Education Report] further underscores this trend by focusing on rural youth aged 14–18. Between 2018 and 2022, smartphone ownership in rural India surged from 36% to 75%, reflecting rapid technological integration. However, digital readiness was uneven: while many youth demonstrated familiarity with SNS for entertainment and peer networking, fewer could leverage these platforms for academic or skill-building purposes. ASER highlighted that the underlying digital literacy use, including safe browsing, email use, or accessing learning portals, was behind the entertainment-based use. This implies an imbalance between access and meaningful use, which is a major determinant in rural and semi-urban university adoption patterns. Rachakanda (2016) in his research came to the understanding that in semi-urban Andhra Pradesh, SNS became a nerve of the youth culture and in particular among students aged 15 to 20. According to his findings, over 60% of teenagers checked on SNS daily, with the rural edges of towns equally represented. Still, the problems with health, physical, and mental, including screen fatigue, physical activity reduction, and academic distractors, were brought up. Gendered trends (male students dominated in gaming and entertainment SNS, and the female ones favoured communication platforms) also appeared. This represents the adoption not only as a situation of infrastructure but as an issue of local culture that informs the student engagement with SNS.

Pandi and Chinnasamy (2022) have done it at Alagappa University, where SNS has become a component of the knowledge exchange process within the academic environment. Their study showed that WhatsApp was the most favoured (91.7%), followed by YouTube (68.3%), and Facebook (43.3%). The students were utilising these networks to hold webinars, online lessons, quizzes and group projects and highlighted the learning potential of SNS when institutions were aligned to digital tools. However, the absence of digital confidence and abilities in students with rural and semi-urban backgrounds implied that not all of them enjoyed equal opportunities. Even though pupils of city origin got the most of the productive applications, country pupils commonly restricted themselves to social communication, and thus to planned training, it is of the highest importance. Research in Haryana by Singh and Singh (2022) adds further evidence of state-level adoption differences. Their survey of English-major EFL students in state universities revealed that students spent an average of 3–4 hours daily on SNS, primarily for academic coordination during COVID-19. Gender and domicile status shaped patterns: rural students had fewer online friends and less intensive engagement than urban peers, yet they relied heavily on SNS for maintaining contact with instructors during campus closures. The study shows how crises like the pandemic accelerate adoption in ways that blur the rural-urban divide, although gaps remain in frequency and intensity of engagement.Finally, Subudhi and Mahapatro (2022) examined semi-urban Odisha during the pandemic and found that digital consumption rose sharply, with increased online transactions, remote learning, and heavy SNS usage. Students in tier-3 and tier-4 towns used SNS primarily for education and social support during lockdowns, but concerns were raised over exposure to inappropriate content and the psychological impacts of over-dependence. Their findings highlight that while infrastructure improvements and affordable smartphones facilitated access, cultural and psychological readiness remain crucial determinants of meaningful SNS adoption among semi-urban students.

2.3 Drivers of Adoption among Rural and Semi-Urban Students

Four demand-side and supply-side factors chiefly explain why rural and semi-urban Indian students are adopting social networking sites (SNS) at scale. First, near-universal youth access to smartphones and mobile internet has created the base layer: in Jan–Mar 2025, 95.5% of rural 15–29-year-olds who owned a phone owned a smartphone, 92.7% used the internet in the last three months, and overall 97.1% of Indians aged 15–29 used a mobile phone recently (National Sample Survey Office, 2025). These figures sharply reduce device and connectivity frictions that historically constrained SNS use.Second, dramatic data-price declines since the 2016 "Jio effect" lowered the cost of experimentation and always-on usage. The average price per GB fell from ₹226 (2015) to ₹11.78 (2018), with India ranked among the world's cheapest mobile-data markets by 2020 (The New Indian Express, 2025). Affordability converts occasional users into daily SNS participants, particularly students on tight budgets. Third, infrastructure extension to the last-mile has improved service availability beyond cities. Under BharatNet (2025), 2,18,347 gram panchayats were "service ready" by March 19, 2025, alongside national fibre expansion and public Wi-Fi hotspots; conditions that enable campuses and hostels in small towns to maintain stable access and thereby sustain SNS-supported learning communities.

As per DataReportal's Digital (2025), Fourth, clear, everyday utility pulls students onto platforms. By early 2025, India counted ~491 million social media identities, and usage is sticky: Indians spend about 2h 28m per day on social platforms. For students, WhatsApp groups coordinate classes; YouTube substitutes or supplements lectures; and Instagram and Telegram distribute notes and exam tips. High utility and habituation (peer groups, notifications, communities of practice) interact to enhance continuance intention that mainstream adoption theories anticipate. One last driver is increasing household access and digital payment literacy: 85.5% of households are equipped with a smartphone, and among young bank customers online, 99.5% use UPI (Suneja, 2025). These are indicators of greater digital confidence, which is carried over to SNS use to communicate, collaborate, and earn credentials. Together, inexpensive information, competent equipment, rural fibre penetration, and apparent educational/social utility have converged to make the adoption of SNSs logical and everyday among students not in the city.

2.4 Barriers and Challenges

In India, rural and semi-urban students are exposed to various structural, socio-cultural, and perceptual limitations to the uptake of SNS. As per Roy and Gouda (2025), at the infrastructure level, limited broadband connectivity and patchy mobile network coverage remain critical obstacles: only about 199,655 out of 655,968 villages were covered under "Bharat Broadband Network Limited" schemes by 2025, leaving ~456,313 villages still without broadband access. The high cost of deploying infrastructure in remote areas compounds the problem, with rugged geography, low population density, and land acquisition issues driving up development and maintenance costs.Socioeconomic disadvantages intensify digital exclusion. Households with lower income and lower educational attainment are less likely to own devices or invest in data plans. For instance, the
ICRIER study noted that in 2014, only 5.7 % of rural households had access to internet-enabled devices compared to 28.5 % in urban areas (Asrani, 2020). Digital literacy is another major barrier: even among individuals with access, many lack basic ICT skills—such as word processing, information retrieval, or email usage—hindering more meaningful SNS engagement.Cultural and social attitudes further slow uptake. Gendered norms limit smartphone autonomy among rural girls; ethnographic work shows that even when girls have devices, usage is often monitored or constrained. As per Iqbal (2021) and Rousseau et al. (2025), Community scepticism toward social media, privacy concerns, fears of misinformation or cyberbullying, and suspicion of digital intrusion also dissuade adoption, especially among older or conservative social groups. Taken together, these barriers mean that while many rural/semi-urban students may have access in principle, many cannot engage fully, reliably, or safely with SNS as a tool for learning.

2.5 Usage Patterns and Purposes

Student usage of SNS in rural and semi-urban settings is often a blend of social, informational, and educational purposes. As per Kapoor and Pandey (2023), though social use typically dominates. In Punjab, a study of 4,000 rural participants found that over 90% of the 618 smartphone users accessed the internet via mobile devices; among them, male users (22.9%) outnumbered female users (11.3%).This data reflects gendered usage patterns.Further in the studies of Abdulrahman and Dhillon (2025), Comparative studies of youth in India versus Iraq (ages 15–24) show that SNS usage is influenced by social and psychological drivers: young people use social media to express identity, engage with peer groups, and maintain social ties, often regardless of academic intent.According to Reddy et al. (2025), in health or rural youth studies (such as Rajasthan schoolchildren), screen-based media use (including social platforms) is high, often for entertainment or communication, with patterns of use concentrated in evenings or after school hours.Thus, across rural/semi-urban settings, SNS usage tends first to fulfil social and communicative needs, and secondarily academic or informational ones, though in times of disruption (such as COVID-19) the academic use sharply increases.

3. DISCUSSION

The research aimed to critically examine the patterns, drivers, and challenges of social networking site (SNS) adoption among students in rural and semi-urban Indian universities. The findings reveal a transformative shift driven by infrastructural expansion, affordable mobile connectivity, and changing youth behaviours. National data show that by 2025, over 95% of rural youth owned smartphones and more than 92% regularly accessed the internet, narrowing the traditional digital divide. This mobile-first connectivity, accelerated by the “Jio effect” and BharatNet’s fibre rollout, has made SNS participation a daily routine rather than an elite privilege. Researchers like Pandi and Chinnasamy (2022) and Singh and Singh (2022) exemplify how WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook have become more than just a provider of social interaction; so much so, in times of distance learning, it has also facilitated academic communication. Nevertheless, the rate of adoption is not homogeneous, and it is mediated by socio-economic and gender factors. Although everyone is free, rural students, especially women, are limited by factors that include affordability, lack of digital literacy and cultural practices. Although people use SNS to communicate or entertain themselves, a relatively large number of people use it to enrich their academic experience or find employment opportunities, as emphasised by ASER (2023). Reliability is further constrained by the fact that there are still infrastructural gaps, with nearly 456,000 villages still lacking broadband. Further, the patterns of usage are still more social, with educational benefits occurring on an ad hoc basis instead of a systematic one. On the whole, the results present that rural and semi-urban SNS adoption reflects the domestic digital transformation of India, which is widespread but stratified. The critical limitation is no longer access but meaningful, equitable, and educationally productive use, limited by digital skills, institutional advice, and social opinions. The synthesis highlights that future planning has to shift the focus of expansionary infrastructure to the creation of digital competency and inclusive online learning settings, utilising SNS as empowered tools of online learning instead of distractions.

4. CONCLUSION

The finding of the study is that the Indian university students in the rural and semi-urban areas are moving quickly to social networking sites, influenced by the cheap mobile data, a wide connection, and high peer utility. However, the rates of adoption are not evenly distributed and are influenced by gender norms, digital literacy, and socio-economic differences. In this way, although the digital divide linked to access has been reduced, a disparity in meaningful use remains. This gap needs focused digital education, institutional, and culturally appropriate policies of inclusion. Finally, the adoption of SNSs by non-urban students is a measure of the connectivity revolution in India and an unresolved problem of providing equity in digital accessibility to higher education.

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