



Patterns of Social Media Usage among Indian adolescents and Exposure to spiritual content: A Conceptual review

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Abstract

The population of India is one of the youngest and most digitally connected in the world. Social media is not only a place where millions of teens nationwide chat and connect with their friends, it is also where they find news, entertainment, education and more and more, spiritual information. Videos of devotional activities, inspirational talks by gurus, meditation tutorials, and religious reels have silently become a significant part of their lives. But there has been little academic study of this phenomenon. This paper is an attempt to fill the gap. Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Social Learning Theory, this conceptual review explores the behaviour of Indian adolescents who have regular exposure to spiritual content on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and what this exposure may imply about their behaviour and emotional development. The paper does not provide new data, but instead synthesises what we already know about the existing literature and presents a conceptual framework of the way that these forces interact. The paper concludes by outlining the major gaps in the research and recommending areas of future empirical research.

Keywords: Indian teenagers, Social media, Religious content, Digital religion, Media impacts, Emotional Intelligence, YouTube, WhatsApp.

Introduction

In typical Indian family WhatsApp groups, members frequently exchange a variety of religious and spiritual content, including morning prayers, bhajan clips, short videos of spiritual leaders



offering life advice, and various devotional messages forwarded among the group. Parallel trends are observable on YouTube, where channels featuring spiritual leaders such as Sadhguru, Art of Living, Brahmakumaris, and numerous other spiritual content creators have accumulated millions of views. This contemporary media landscape constitutes the environment in which Indian adolescents are currently developing, yet it remains a phenomenon that researchers have only recently begun to investigate systematically.

The population of young individuals aged 10-19 years in India is estimated to be 250 million people, which is one of the largest youth populations in the world. The high pace of the proliferation of low-price smartphones and cheap internet data, one of the changes that the Jio revolution of 2016 has largely generated, has led to the large volumes of such adolescents becoming active users of social media. They watch video-based content, post, invest in influencers, and spend much time on a daily basis on platforms that are built to ensure the user is as engaged as possible. Although a large part of this interaction is entertainment and communication with peers, an increasing percentage is made up of interaction with spiritual and religious material.

This is important on a number of reasons. Adolescence is among the most crucial stages in the development of a human being. It is the time when youth finds their identities, tries to create their values, and start to perceive the world more complicated. The media that they watch at this age is not neutral- it influences what they think, how they feel and even what they do. With spiritual content taking a significant role in the Indian adolescent media diet, it is worth contemplating what impact the exposure is having.

This paper does not purport to offer definitive conclusions. Rather, it constitutes a conceptual review—one not grounded in original empirical data but in the synthesis of existing scholarly literature. The objective is to map the current state of knowledge, identify gaps in the literature, and propose a theoretical framework to guide future empirical research in this domain.

Objectives:

1. To study the use behaviours of Indian adolescents with reference to the frequency, duration, and platform choices in the use of spiritual content in social media.



2. To study the theoretical connection between the frequent exposure to the spiritual material on social media and its possible impact on the behavioural patterns and value formation of Indian adolescents.

Methodology:

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual review design to evaluate and synthesise the existing body of literature surrounding digital media and youth socialisation. Rather than collecting primary empirical data through surveys or field interviews, this study relies on a systematic evaluation of peer-reviewed journals, theoretical models, and established secondary data sources.

To map the intersection of youth culture and digital media, structured literature searches were executed across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and PubMed. The search strategy utilised targeted keywords and conceptual combinations, specifically focusing on: social media usage among Indian adolescents, digital religion, online spiritual content, prosocial behavior, emotional intelligence, and foundational mass communication frameworks such as Uses and Gratifications Theory.

The literature was carefully curated based on three core inclusion criteria:

1. **Contextual Relevance:** The studies had to directly address or be applicable to the unique socio-cultural and digital landscape of India.
2. **Demographic Focus:** The research had to explicitly center on the media consumption habits, psychological development, or behavioral outcomes of adolescent cohorts.
3. **Theoretical Alignment:** The literature needed to offer substantive value to mass communication scholarship and psychological frameworks.

Review of Literature

Indian teenagers are heavy social media users, and their feeds look a little different from those of their peers elsewhere in the world. Yes, they're on YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp like everyone else — but what's unique is how deeply family life bleeds into their digital experience. WhatsApp group chats in Indian households aren't just for cousins sharing memes; grandparents, parents, and teens all coexist in the same groups, which means young people are constantly stumbling across the spiritual content their elders share — temple livestreams, devotional songs, quotes from religious teachers. Add to this the explosion of spiritual content



in regional languages like Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu, and it becomes clear why this kind of material reaches teens even when they're not actively looking for it.

This is part of a bigger shift in how religion works in the digital age. Researcher Heidi Campbell argues that the internet hasn't simply put religion online — it has fundamentally changed how people experience and make meaning from it. In India, spiritual content now ranges from traditional prayers and scripture readings to slick, influencer-style videos. Figures like Sadhguru have tens of millions of followers, sitting comfortably at the intersection of ancient wisdom and modern content creation. And because most of this consumption happens casually — a quick video between entertainment clips — young people are absorbing these ideas without necessarily setting out to.

That matters because of what this content actually carries. Goleman's framework of Emotional Intelligence — self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation — maps remarkably well onto values that have lived in Indian spiritual traditions for centuries: *karuna* (compassion), equanimity, non-violence. Bandura's social learning theory tells us that young people absorb behaviours and values from what they observe in the media. So the question this paper raises is a genuinely interesting one — if Indian teens are casually but regularly encountering these values through social media, could it quietly be shaping their emotional development? That's the gap this research sets out to explore.

4. Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this paper is based on three theories of mass communication and psychology that have been established. The combination of them provides an opportunity to comprehend not only how adolescents get access to spiritual material on social media, but also why and what the implications can be.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevich) flips the usual question — instead of asking what media does *to* people, it asks what people do *with* media. Audiences are active choosers, consuming content to meet specific needs. Indian teens engaging with spiritual content aren't passive recipients; they're likely seeking something from it — comfort, a sense of belonging, identity, or curiosity. Understanding what draws them to this content is the first step in understanding its impact.



Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross) explains the slow, cumulative effect of repeated media exposure. It's not about one video changing someone overnight — it's about how months and years of consistent messaging gradually shape how a person sees the world. For Indian teenagers who are continuously surrounded by spiritual content across family WhatsApp groups and social feeds, this steady drip of values-driven material could, over time, quietly influence their worldview and behaviour.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura) bridges exposure and actual behavioural change. People — especially young people — learn by observing others they find credible or inspiring. On social media, this happens through parasocial relationships with spiritual influencers and gurus. Teens watch how these figures think, speak, and carry themselves, and gradually internalise those patterns. This theory helps explain why some spiritual content creators hold far more influence over young audiences than others.

Together, these three frameworks offer a layered understanding of the relationship between spiritual media consumption and adolescent emotional development.

Comparative Analysis:

Combining both the literature review and theoretical framework, this paper suggests a conceptual model that consists of four parts to describe the correlation between social media usage by Indian adolescents and exposure to spiritual content.

The initial component of the model is Social Media Usage Pattern. This is the rate, time, platform used and the kind of material that a young one frequently engages with. The social media usage of teens is not uniform, as a teenager who spends three hours a day on Instagram Reels will be in a very different media environment than a teenager who watches YouTube on a regular basis with educational content. The patterns of usage determine the likelihood and content of spiritual content exposure, which in turn is influenced by a complex interaction of personal preferences, family background, peer group behaviour, and algorithmic curation.

The second factor is Spiritual Content Exposure. This is a reflection of the degree of spiritual or religious material an adolescent is exposed to in reality, whether by seeking it out, being fed it or by family on WhatsApp. Notably, these exposures are incidental to a large extent. The teenager who gets ten devotional forwards a day in one of the family groups has not decided to pursue spiritual content, but she is still being exposed to it and this exposure builds up over



time. The nature of the content is also important: there is probably a distinction between the exposure to the traditional devotional content and to the more interactive and personality-based spiritual influencer content.

The third factor is Adolescent Behaviour. This includes a variety of outcomes such as prosocial behaviour (helping others, charity, community participation), ethical decision-making, coping with stress and lifestyle choices such as diet and daily routine. The model suggests that spiritual content exposure affects behaviour in two main ways: the incremental development of spiritual values as a component of the worldview of the young person (Cultivation Theory), and the active training of behaviours that are modelled by admired spiritual role models (Social Learning Theory).

The fourth factor is Emotional Intelligence. Based on the framework by Goleman, the model also postulates that a long-term and thoughtful practice of reading spiritual material, especially that which puts more emphasis on compassion, self-awareness, and inner discipline, can lead to the growth of emotional intelligence over time. This will be a long-term, indirect impact and not immediate. It would also tend to be greatly relative to the emotional state of the individual already developed, to the quality and genuineness of the spiritual material, and to the social environment, in general, in which it is taken.

The model does not imply that spiritual content in social media is necessarily positive. Alternative negative routes are also conceivable: misinformation in the guise of spiritual wisdom, exploitative content by unverified or counterfeit spiritual leaders and the validation of retrogressive social attitudes in the guise of convention. The same negative effects ought to be equally considered in any future empirical research using this framework.

There are various variables that are likely to moderate the relationships in this model. These are parental monitoring of social media, the religious and cultural background of the adolescent, peer group influence, the credibility and the reach of the spiritual content creator, and the socioeconomic factors in general. The Indian diversity (caste, class, language, religion, region) is unprecedented, which implies that such moderating variables will be especially important and results obtained in one setting may not be readily applicable to another.



6. Implications and Future Research

The theoretical framework suggested in this paper has implications on a number of groups of people. To scholars involved in mass communication and media studies, this is the most pressing implication: we require additional empirical research on the subject. The fact that Indian teens read spiritual material on social media is immense, expanding, and has ramifications, but it is almost completely under-researched in terms of rigorous scholarship. The mixed method should be employed in future research, where surveys are accompanied by qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, in order to record the extent and the depth of this phenomenon. Comparative studies of regions, languages, religious cultures, socioeconomic levels would be especially advantageous.

To teachers, school counsellors, and parents, the paper recommends that spiritual content on social media is an important aspect of adolescent media life which ought to be given more consideration. Media literacy education in India does not often take a closer look at religious or spiritual material in particular - this is an opportunity to seize. Education that teaches adolescents to engage with spiritual material in a critical and reflective way, instead of passively taking it in, may serve to maximise the benefits and protect against the dangers of spiritual material.

The paper poses a question of responsibility to content creators and spiritual organisations in India who use digital media. In case spiritual content really can influence the values and emotional growth of adolescents, then the individuals who create such content have an unspoken responsibility of doing so in a thoughtful way. This implies basing content on real spiritual practices, not exploiting young viewers and having awareness of the role models they are modeling.

Lastly, the paper serves as a reminder to policymakers and regulators considering the safety of children online that the digital content environment is not simply a question of entertainment and wellbeing in a limited psychological view, but it is also where the values, beliefs and spiritual lives of young people are being formed. This should be considered in any serious consideration of online safety among the young Indians.



7. Conclusion

In this paper, it has been posited that the convergence of social media, spiritual material and adolescent development in India is a mass communication research area that is seriously understudied. Millions of young Indians are exposed to devotional videos, spiritual influencers and religious content on their phones, every day, through the same platforms that they are on every day, primarily to be entertained and connected with their social circles. This is no small exposure. It occurs at a young age in life, it is accruing, and it is influenced by strong forces such as family and peer groups and algorithms of global technology corporations.

This paper has presented a conceptual framework of how social media usage patterns, exposure to spiritual content, teenage behaviour, and emotional intelligence are related with each other with the help of Uses and Gratifications Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Social Learning Theory as a theoretical framework. This model is not a clear explanation of how things occur - this is a point of departure to be investigated. Its proposed relationships are plausible according to the current theory and available evidence, however, they must be empirically tested, cautiously, and in a manner that is sensitive to the incredible diversity of India.

The only thing that is definite is that this issue is important. The largest youth demographic in the world is in India and any decisions that researchers, educators, policymakers, content makers and parents make today regarding how they are going to make sense of the digital media settings of the youth will have very long lasting impacts. This essay is a case to support making such decisions.

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