

From Reels to Real Life: Understanding Youth Identity and Well-Being in Bangladesh and India

Rajib Nandy

Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

Abstract:

The student life embraces social media. The presence of Smartphones and fast internet keeps the students on Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok and YouTube hours on end. Short videos such as Reels influence psychology, self-identity, and social behavior of the users. Digital echo chambers are caused by encoding users with similar content using algorithm-based recommendations. This may increase self-esteem, body awareness, social comparison and stress more so among the students of the university. This paper will examine the effect of Reel use on mental health, self-identity, and focus on studies. It targets the students of Chittagong University and Dhaka University in Bangladesh and Jadavpur University and Calcutta University in India.

A mixed method was used to conduct the study. First of all, a survey of 200 students was organized online in order to measure their actual viewing patterns, emotional reactions, self-identity, and concentration. A qualitative analysis of 100 popular and viral reel content was then carried out to gain an insight into the content, style of presentation, and any possible psychological effect. The theory of the work was established on the ground of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cultivation Theory that prove useful in the analysis of the causes of youth content consumption and influence of repeated content. In the comparison of students in Bangladesh and India, the researcher observed that students in both countries consume similar online material. Bangladeshi students however, claim

more of the mental stress and less academic concentration with Indian students indicating more changes in the social acceptance and culture attitude. The results can be used by the students, teachers, and policymakers to enhance digital literacy, ensure safe online practices, and increase social awareness. It also provides research on the relationship between virtual and real-life experiences of the youth in South Asia today.

Keywords: Social Media Reels, Youth Identity, Mental Well-Being, Cross-National Study, Bangladesh, India

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of young people's daily lives. The widespread use of smartphones and high-speed internet keeps young people engaged on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube for hours a day (Montag et al., 2021; Tandoc et al., 2015). In particular, short-form video formats, such as 'reels', provide immediate entertainment as well as long-term effects on the user's psychology, self-identity, and social behavior (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Kross et al., 2013). Through algorithm-based content recommendation systems, users are almost unconsciously trapped in similar content, creating a digital "echo chamber" (Gerbner, 1998; Montag et al., 2021). This situation can increase social comparison, body consciousness, self-esteem, and stress levels among young people (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017; Balhara et al., 2021).

While international research has extensively discussed the positive and negative effects of social media, in-depth analysis of the impact of reels in the Bangladeshi context especially among university students is still limited. In addition, research on the comparative context between students in Bangladesh and India is significantly less. In order to fill this gap, the current study conducted a survey and content analysis on students from four reputable universities. The aim of the study was to determine how the use of reels affects the self-identity, social behavior, and mental well-being of young people.

2. Objectives of the study

The use of social media reels has various effects on the self-identity, behavior, and mental well-being of young people. Previous research has shown that short-form video content can have a significant impact on users' self-identity, body awareness, social comparison, and mental health (Tandoc et al., 2015; Balhara et al., 2021; Kross et al., 2013). At the same time, social media use affects attention to various academic tasks and daily performance (Radesky et al., 2020; Montag et al., 2021). Comparative studies of this effect among university students in Bangladesh and India are limited. This article considers three main aspects:

3.1. Self-identity and personality development: How Reels is contributing to the self-identity and personality development of young students.

3.2. Impact on mental health, self-confidence, and body awareness: Does short-form video content have a negative impact on students' mental health, self-confidence, and body awareness?

3.3. Academic Attention and Daily Performance: How Reels-based Content is Affecting Students' Concentration, Academic Attention, and Daily Performance.

The analysis of these three aspects reveals a comparative picture of social media usage and its impact among university students in Bangladesh and India (Rahman et al., 2022; Singh & Singh, 2021).

3. Scope and Area of the Study

The study will be conducted on 200 students of the Communication and Journalism Departments of four universities in Bangladesh and India. The survey will analyze the students' Reels viewing habits, time usage patterns, emotional responses to the content, and self-identity position. In addition, 100 popular and viral Reels content will be selected, and their content, presentation style, and impact will be analyzed.

The included universities are-

- Bangladesh: Chittagong University, Dhaka University
- India: Jadavpur University, Calcutta University

Rationale for selection-

Academic diversity, geographical and cultural representation, digital trends in students' use of social media, cross-boundary academic exchange, and joint research-collaboration practices.

4. Research Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach, which involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach is able to present a complete picture of young students' use of social media reels and its impact.

4.1 Quantitative Data: A total of 200 students from universities in Bangladesh and India were included through structured online questionnaires. The survey included the following topics:

- Daily duration of reel viewing and usage patterns
- Preferred content types
- Perceptions of mental health and self-confidence
- Changes in academic outcomes, attention, and concentration

Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis were used to analyze the quantitative data (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017; Rahman et al., 2022).

4.2 Qualitative Data: The text and frames of 100 popular and viral Reels content selected for qualitative data were analyzed. In addition, the workings of social media algorithms and the impact of content delivery were also reviewed to identify themes related to user experience, self-identity, and social comparison. Students' experiences and perspectives on digital usage were also collected through focus group discussions (Singh & Singh, 2021; Montag et al., 2021).

4.3 Ethical Considerations: The voluntary consent of the participants in the study was ensured. Due care was taken to ensure the confidentiality and sensitivity of personal information during data collection.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study uses two primary theoretical frameworks that are relevant to analyzing youth use of reels and their effects:

5.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974)

According to this theory, users use media to fulfill their personal needs and desires. In the context of reels, young people are mainly using content in four ways:

- Entertainment: A way to reduce daily stress and boredom.
- Information Seeking: Obtaining information about new topics, trends, or learning.
- Social Acceptance: Acceptance and participation in friends or social networks.
- Passing Time: Viewing entertaining content in leisure time.

This framework is helpful in determining the purpose of using reels and the psychological motivation of the user.

5.2 Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998)

According to Cultivation Theory, repeated exposure to the same media content influences users' perceptions of reality. In the context of Reels, this theory suggests that:

- Young people are adopting influencer culture, which influences their personal lives and social norms.
- Repeated exposure to the same content can increase dissatisfaction with real life and stress.

These two theoretical frameworks have been used together to analyze the motives, behavior, and mental health of young people using Reels.

6. Significance and Relevance of the Study

The significance of this study is multidimensional and important in a cross-boundary context. By analyzing the social, cultural, and educational similarities and differences of university students in Bangladesh and India, it has been possible to identify the impact of reels use, mental health, and diversity of self-identity (Rahman et al., 2022; Singh & Singh, 2021).

The way students use Reels in both countries affects their academic focus, concentration, and daily routines in different ways. The study's results can help improve digital literacy and encourage safer online habits. It also highlights how digital echo chambers can shape young people's online behavior and mental health worldwide.

7. Literature Review

The proliferation of digital media and the emergence of social media platforms are closely linked to the lives of young people. In particular, short-form video content, such as Instagram reels, Facebook shorts, and TikTok videos, are being used to meet young people's needs for entertainment, social communication, and information gathering (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Tandoc et al., 2015).

Reels and Self-Identity: Several studies have shown that continuous content viewing on social media platforms affects young people's self-identity and personality development. Users often define their identities based on popular trends, influencer culture, and peer reactions (Kross et al., 2013; Montag et al., 2021).

Mental Health and Body Consciousness: Regular use of short-form video content can lead to low self-esteem, increased social comparison, and stress (Balhara et al., 2021; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). According to Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, repeatedly viewing the same type of content distorts the user's perception of reality, which can increase students' mental health and dissatisfaction with life (Gerbner, 1998).

Academic Attention and Performance: Excessive time spent on online content affects students' concentration, academic attention, and daily performance. Short-form video content in particular can provide quick gratification, but in the long run, it can lead to decreased attention and negative effects on academic outcomes (Radesky et al., 2020; Singh & Singh, 2021).

Bangladesh and India contexts: There is limited research on the relationship between students' social media use and mental health in Bangladesh, where the specific impact of reels has been analyzed (Rahman et al., 2022). Comparative research on the impact of youth's use of short-form videos is also underway in the Indian context, but the cross-boundary impact between the two countries is still insufficiently studied (Singh & Singh, 2021; Montag et al., 2021).

8. Findings from Content Analysis

The study analyzed frames of 100 popular and viral Reels content. This analysis identified some important trends and patterns-

8.1 Content Type

Most Reels were entertainment (45%) dance, singing, comedy, and trend-based challenges, etc. This was followed by fashion and beauty-related content (20%), which can influence the body image and beauty consciousness of young people. Educational (15%) and social awareness/political (10%) content were relatively less common. Sports and other content were about 10%.

8.2 Algorithmic Pattern

The Reels algorithm repeatedly showed the same type of content, which locked users into a specific theme or pattern. For example, if someone watches a few fashion Reels, then later on, their feed would get a lot of similar content. This creates a digital echo chamber, where the user experience becomes undifferentiated.

8.3 Self-identity and social comparison

Many reels feature the so-called 'perfect lifestyle' living lavishly, using luxury goods, or displaying artificial beauty. This content can create social comparison, an inferiority complex, and self-esteem issues among young people.

8.4 Mental health implications

Content analysis has shown that the fast-paced and overly stimulating visual style of reels can sometimes increase restlessness, lack of concentration, and distraction. Students are trying to gain social acceptance by repeatedly participating in the same trends, which can increase stress and addiction.

8.5 Cultural characteristics

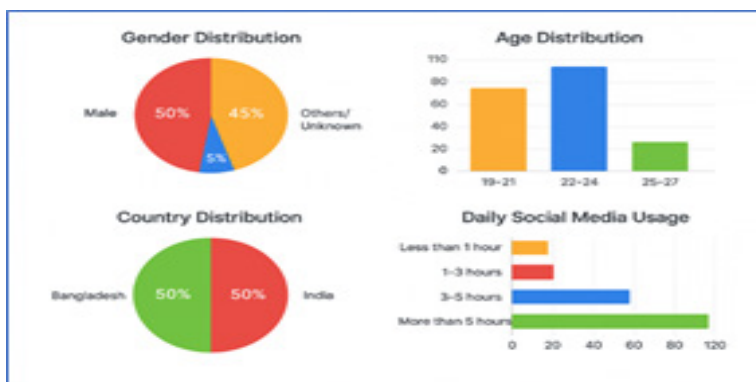
Some differences have been observed between Bangladeshi and Indian content. Indian reels are more influenced by Bollywood, fashion, and celebrity culture, while Bangladeshi reels are relatively more likely to feature local language, folk music, and social issue-based content. However, in both cases, the preponderance of entertainment and fashion-based content is evident.

Overall, content analysis indicates that Reels is primarily focused on entertainment, but also includes elements of self-identification, social comparison, and algorithmic addiction.

9. Survey results and findings

9.1. General information: Gender and age distribution: Half of the survey participants were male, and almost half were female. The majority of the participants (55%) were between 22 and 24 years of age, which proves that the main age group of university-level students is 20-24 years.

Country parity: Students from Bangladesh and India participated equally (50%-50%), which is suitable for cross-boundary comparisons.



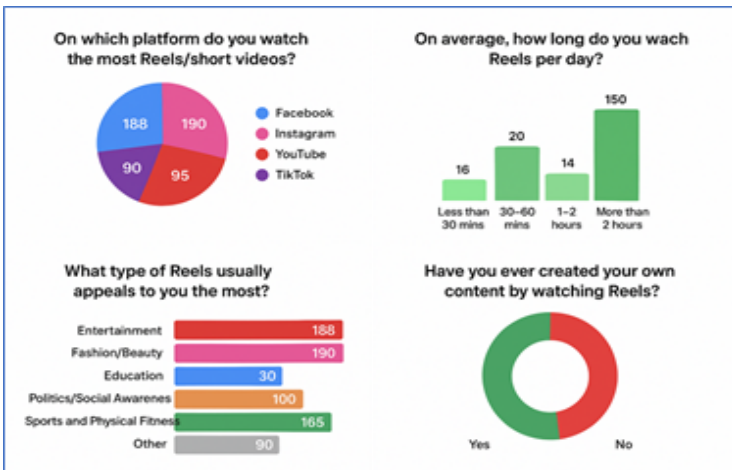
University parity: An equal number of students (25) from four universities participated in the survey, which makes it easy to collect comparative data from each institution.

Social media usage time: A large proportion of participants (87.5%) use social media for more than 3 hours a day, with 55% of users using it for more than 5 hours. This indicates that young students are heavily engaged with reels and other social media content.

59.2. Reels usage patterns and habits: The study assessed the participants' usage patterns and habits of Reels or short videos. It was found that the highest number of participants viewed Reels on the Instagram platform (190), slightly more than Facebook (188). On the other hand, YouTube (90) and TikTok (95) were used by a smaller number of users. No users viewed Reels on 'other' platforms. This indicates that the popularity of Reels on social media is mainly limited to Instagram and Facebook. A clear trend was also observed regarding the average time spent watching Reels per day. 150 participants watched Reels for more than two hours per day, which represents a large proportion of the total number of participants. In comparison, 16 watched for less than 30 minutes, 20 watched for 30–60 minutes, and 14 watched for 1–2 hours.

This data suggests that most users watch Reels for a long time per day, which may affect their time management. The

survey also found some important implications regarding the type of Reels. Entertainment Reels (188 people) and fashion/beauty-related Reels (190 people) are the most popular among users. In addition, Reels related to sports and physical fitness (165 people) and politics/social awareness (100 people) are also quite popular. Educational Reels are found to be more interesting by 80 people, and other types of Reels are popular among 90 users. This indicates that users mainly select Reels based on entertainment and personal interests. The Reels users' habits of creating their own content were also surveyed. It was found that most users (188 people) have created their own content after watching Reels, while only 12 have never created content. This proves that the tendency of creativity and participation is very high among Reels users.



Finally, the survey also found information about the impact of using Reels. 60 participants felt that Reels waste their time or disrupt their concentration, 45 did not think so, and 95 said that it sometimes happens. This suggests that while Reels are important for entertainment and education, their excessive use can be a time-waster or distraction for some users.

Overall, the study results indicate that Reels have had a profound impact on users' daily lives and entertainment habits on social media. Users primarily view Reels on Instagram and

Facebook platforms for extended periods of time, based on entertainment and personal interests, and many create their own content from these experiences. However, excessive use can lead to distraction in some cases.

9.3. Self-Identity, Mental Health, and Self-Esteem: The study assessed the impact of the reels on the participants' self-identity, mental health, and self-esteem. It was found that a large proportion of the participants (120 yes and 160 sometimes) expressed a tendency to compare their lives with others after watching the reels. Only 40 participants said they never made such comparisons. This indicates that comparing themselves to the lifestyles displayed on social media has become a common mental habit. The 'perfect lifestyle' displayed in the reels can affect the mental health of users. 54 participants in the survey felt inferiority or depression, while 120 expressed this feeling sometimes. Only 26 participants said they never felt such pressure. The study also found important information about concerns about body shape or beauty. 150 participants said their anxiety increased after watching the reels, 10 sometimes, and 40 never felt anxiety. This indicates that content about body beauty or fitness is directly affecting users' self-esteem. Reels can also affect users' self-confidence and social acceptance. 25 participants said yes, their self-confidence or social acceptance is affected, 130 said sometimes, and 45 said no. This indicates that many users sometimes feel the impact of Reels on social acceptance and self-confidence.

The survey also found information on the impact on academic focus and studies. 55 participants felt that Reels were affecting their studies, 26 said no, and 119 were not sure. This indicates that the impact of Reels on academic focus is not direct, but can create doubt and instability.

Overall, the results of the study prove that Reels has a significant impact on users' mental health, self-esteem, and self-identity. Users are particularly concerned about comparing their lives, bodies, and social acceptance due to the 'perfect lifestyle' and fitness/beauty content.

9.4. Family and Social Influence: At this stage of the survey, the students were asked - Does your family know that you regularly watch Reels? The study found that most of the participants' families are aware of their Reels use. Out of a total of 200, 190 (95%) reported that their family knows that they regularly use Reels, while only 5 (2.5%) did not report it, and another 5 (2.5%) refrained from giving an opinion. This indicates that the use of Reels is largely open to the participants' families.

The question was whether they feel competition with family or friends regarding showing or making Reels? Out of a total of 200, 105 (52.5%) participants reported that they feel some competition with family or friends in showing or making Reels. On the other hand, 70 (35%) said that they do not feel such competition, and 25 (12.5%) refrained from giving an opinion on this issue. The results suggest that social networks and family environment have a certain influence on the use of Reels, and many are considering it as a competitive social activity.

The question at this stage of the research survey was - Have Reels affected your social relationships or spending time with your family? The results of the study showed that 147 (73.5%) of the 200 participants felt that Reels had an impact on their social relationships or spending time with their family. 20 (10%) felt that there was no such impact, and 33 (16.5%) said that they sometimes felt the impact. This indicates that there are significant changes in the time management of family and social relationships due to the use of Reels on mobile platforms.

The results of the study show that the use of mobile Reels is not only a means of personal entertainment, but it also has an effective impact on the family and social context. Most users tell their families about the use of Reels, and many feel a sense of competition in this use with family or friends. In addition, almost three-quarters of the users feel that it is affecting their social relationships or spending time with their family.

9.5. Algorithms, addiction, and cross-national habits: The study found that a large portion of Reels users acknowledge the influence of the algorithm. About 170 people often noticed that if they watched more of the same type of Reels, the platform showed them more of that content. On the other hand, only 30 users did not experience this. In addition, signs of addiction were also observed among users. 165 users admitted that they had decided not to watch Reels, but later lost control and watched Reels again. Only 35 users had not experienced such a situation.

The results show that Reels' algorithm is influencing users' viewing habits, and it is sometimes giving rise to addictive behavior.

10. Analysis of Results

10.1. Reels Usage and Time Pattern: The survey found that the amount of time students spend watching Reels daily varied. Many watch videos for 30–60 minutes a day. Instagram and Facebook are the most used platforms.

Analysis: The high time usage is mainly due to entertainment and social interaction. This shows that students are using Reels as an escapism or a source of joy during daily stress or free time.

10.2. Algorithm and Habitual Effects: In the study, students mentioned that after watching Reels more, the platform automatically shows the same type of content.

Analysis: This algorithmic process is reinforcing user habits. Students are getting addicted to the same type of content instead of new content, which can affect time management and attention in the long run.

10.3. Social and Family Effects: According to the survey, most students' families know about their Reels viewing. Many express a sense of competition with friends or family over Reels. Some students said that spending time with family is being affected by watching Reels.

Analysis: This indicates that Reels are not only entertainment,

but also play an important role in social competition and relational change.

10.4. Lifestyle and psychological impact: Students feel pressure or anxiety by comparing their lives with the lifestyles of others. In addition, concerns about body image or lifestyle have also been observed.

Analysis: The content of Reels can affect students' mental health. It is related to increased self-esteem, social pressure, and mental stress.

10.5. Cross-national or university-based variation: Different patterns and times of use of Reels have been observed among students from different universities.

Analysis: The social and cultural influence of place or educational institution is affecting the use and engagement of Reels.

10.6. Other behavioural patterns: The habit of creating, sharing, liking, or commenting on Reels has been observed among students.

Analysis: This indicates that students are not just passive viewers, but are participating in participatory culture. Engagement behaviour is related to social relationships, popularity, and self-expression.

11. Discussion

Some important aspects emerged from the analysis of the survey and research results related to Reels or short videos:

11.1. Daily use and time patterns: Students watch Reels for a significant amount of time every day, especially on Instagram and Facebook platforms.

Discussion: This indicates that students are using Reels as a primary means of entertainment and social communication. In the long run, this can have an impact on time management and the learning process.

11.2. Algorithm and habituation effects: Repeated viewing of the same type of content leads users to see more similar

content.

Discussion: This reinforces the user's habit, which can increase the risk of addiction. This habit is related to students' stress and attentional division.

11.3. Social and family effects: The survey found that many students expressed a sense of competition when watching Reels with family and friends.

Discussion: This indicates that Reels is not only entertainment, but also a factor in social competition and interpersonal relationships.

11.4. Psychological and lifestyle effects: Students experience stress or anxiety by comparing their lives with the lifestyles of others. Concerns about body image or lifestyle have also been observed.

Discussion: This is how social media content affects students' mental health and is related to self-esteem and stress.

11.5. Behavioural patterns and participatory culture: Students are not just passive viewers, but also show engagement by creating, sharing, liking or commenting on reels.

Discussion: This is part of participatory culture, which is related to social relationships, self-expression, and online popularity.

That is, the survey and analysis indicate that the impact of reels use is multidimensional entertainment, social, psychological, and behavioural.

12. Conclusion

The growing influence of social media is deeply affecting the self-identity, mental health, and social relationships of the young people of both countries. A comparative analysis of university students in Bangladesh and India will provide useful guidance for policymakers, teachers, and parents. This study will serve as a contemporary lesson in understanding the intersection of virtual and physical reality in the present era, which will help to consciously protect the young generation

of both countries from the impact of digital reality. The use of reels is affecting students' daily lives, mental health, and social behaviour. In line with the objectives of the study, the findings clearly indicate that reels are not only a means of entertainment, but also an important part of students' behaviour and lifestyle. The results of the study showed that students spend a significant amount of time watching reels or short videos every day, with Instagram and Facebook being the most used platforms. The platform's algorithms are attracting students to similar content, which can affect time management and attention. At the same time, the use of reels is also affecting students' family and social relationships; many express a sense of competition with friends or family, and spend less time with family. In addition, students experience stress and anxiety by comparing their lives with those of others, which can affect self-esteem and mental health. Students are not just passive viewers, but are actively participating by creating, sharing, and liking or commenting on reels, which is related to online engagement and self-expression as part of a participatory culture. In summary, the use of reels is affecting students' daily lives, mental health, and social behavior in many ways. The findings of the study clearly indicate that reels are not just a means of entertainment, but an important part of students' behavior and lifestyle.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis of the study, some recommendations can be made:

13.1. Time management and conscious use

Advise students to set aside time for Reels and other social media. Organize awareness programs on 'Digital Wellbeing' from universities or educational institutions.

13.2. Mental health awareness

Counselling or peer support systems to reduce stress. Make students aware of the content of social media and the effects of life comparison.

13.3. Social and family harmony

Consciously maintain digital balance to spend time with family and friends. Guidance for positive social interaction and competition management among students.

13.4. Guidelines for participatory culture

Teach students safety, privacy, and ethical guidelines in content creation. Promote creative engagement on academic or co-curricular platforms.

13.5. Recommendations for future research

Comparative research with students of other ages, universities, or countries. Longitudinal study on long-term psychological impact and time-use patterns.

References

1. Montag, C., et al. (2021). Problematic social media use in childhood and adolescence. *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, 14, 100394. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306460324000297>
2. Tandoc, E. C. Jr. (2015). Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 139–146. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563214005767>
3. Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509–523. <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/37/4/509/1816598>
4. Kross, E., et al. (2013). Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults. *PLOS ONE*, 8(8), e69841. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0069841>

5. Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation theory in social media. *Simply Psychology*.
6. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cultivation-theory.html>
7. Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(3), 237–246. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0265407512453827>
8. Balhara, Y. P. S., et al. (2021). Social media use and mental health among adolescents. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 63(6), 624–630. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8207346/>
9. Balhara, Y. P. S., et al. (2021). Social media use and its impact on mental health: Evidence from youth populations. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57, 102532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2021.102532>
10. Montag, C., et al. (2021). Understanding the psychology of social media: A cross-cultural perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 41, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.02.002>
11. Rahman, M., et al. (2022). Social media use and mental health among university students in Bangladesh. *Heliyon*, 8(3), e08976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e08976>
12. Radesky, J., et al. (2020). Digital media and attention in youth: Mechanisms and outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 145(1), e20193636. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-3636>
13. Singh, A., & Singh, R. (2021). Short-form video consumption and its psychological effects among Indian youth. *Journal of Media Studies*, 36(2), 45–62.
14. Tandoc, E. C., Ferrucci, P., & Duffy, M. (2015). Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is Facebooking depressing? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 139–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.10.053>

15. Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). Digital screen time limits and mental well-being among adolescents: A population-based study. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438>
16. Blumler, J. G., & Katz, E. (1974). *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research*. Sage.
17. Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. *Mass Communication and Society*, 1(3-4), 175-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.1998.9677855>