

**Social Media and Suicidal Ideation among  
Students Pursuing Higher Education:  
A Study Based in Lucknow (U.P.)**

**Summary of Thesis**

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# CHAPTER-1

## Introduction

Since its inception new media or in common terms digital media has given us a variety of mediated places like blogs, communities and Social Networking Sites (SNS), thereby attracting millions of users. Social media is a term none of us is unaware about today. Having a social networking account and to be connected with people globally has become a common feature. Some of the most common social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. according to the report released by research firm Global Web Index, Facebook is the most used online platform for social networking. The influence of social media on students pursuing higher education is of particular importance in the contemporary scenario, not just because this group of youngsters (youth<sup>1</sup>), aged between 18-24years, is developmentally vulnerable but also because they are among the heaviest users of social networking. A survey conducted by TCS in year 2013, suggests that about 75 percent of India's youth prefers social media over phone calls to communicate, with more students using the internet for school-related tasks, thereby exploiting the power of internet (India's youth prefer communicating through social networks:Report, 2013).

### 1.1 Use of Social Media in India

World is growing at a fast pace. The word social media has grabbed attention in India and the country has observed phenomenal growth in terms of its users. Easy availability of internet, its prompt access and focus on digitalization are the key

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Notes: <sup>1</sup>The Unites Nations, for statistical consistency across regions, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years (Source: unesco.org).

factors that have contributed to the growth on internet in the country. Further, the increased rate of mobile use has intensified the access of internet in both rural and urban India. According to Statistical Portal, Statista.com, India is the second largest online market in the world after China. As per the website, China had 772 million internet users in December 2017, while India followed it with 462.12 million users in total. The data also suggests that India is ahead of developed countries like United States of America (312.32 million users) and United Kingdom (63.06 million users). It won't be wrong here to say that the number will increase in the coming years. According to another set of data on the website, India is expected to have about 635.8 million internet users by 2021. The continuous increase in the number of internet users in the country is supposedly a matter of concern. While internet undoubtedly has a number of benefits, its negative impacts cannot be ignored completely.

## **1.2 Suicide and Suicidal Ideations**

The word suicide was first coined by Sir Thomas Browne in his 'Religio Medici' in 1642 and subsequently by Walter Charleton in 1651 (Rastogi & Kochar, 2010). Suicide can be defined as "self-inflicted death in which a person makes an intentional, direct and conscious effort to end one's life" (Comer, 2002). However, according to Edwin Schneidman, suicide is "the conscious act of self-included destruction, commonly understood as a different dimensional despair of a needful individual action which describes an issue in which the action is adopted as a better solution" (Schneidman, 1985). Meanwhile, Durkheim (1917) defined suicide as "death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he

knows will produce this result. This however excludes those who survive the attempt (Durkheim, 1917).

Talking about suicidal ideation, it is evident that it is the thought process, which occurs before committing of suicide, where people think to end their own lives (Schlebusch, 2005). Suicide ideation is considered to be an important precursor to later attempted and complete suicide (Brent, et al., January 1993). Any self-reported thoughts of engaging in suicide related behaviour can be called as suicidal ideation. This may result from individual's capacity to deal with emotional pain and coping strategies. It was found that adults aged between 18-24 had the highest incidence of reported suicide ideation (Crosby, Cheltenham, & Sacks, 1994).

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

While social networking does help in broadening social connections and learning technical skills, its risk cannot be ignored. It is a platform that gives youngsters an opportunity to express themselves without any rules and regulations. The social networking sites create a virtual environment for youngsters, where they can make 'n' number of friends as per their choices, involve in personal relations and are free to do whatever they like to, taking them far from actual reality of life. For instance, Sheeks and Birchmeier (2007) found that people who are shy but wish to be social were able to develop a closer and more satisfactory relationship with others online, compared to those who are characterized by high shyness/low sociability, low shyness/high sociability or low shyness. The lack or difficulty in self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure makes adolescents vulnerable to ills such as Facebook depression, sexting, and cyberbullying, which can be considered as realistic threats (Ramasubbu,

2015). Other problems such as Internet addiction, psychological distress and suicidal ideation are issues that continue to be under intense scrutiny of researchers in various studies.

The current study investigates if there is any association between use of social media, specifically social networking sites, and suicidal ideations among the students pursuing higher education.

#### **1.4 Need and Scope of Study**

While social networking does help in broadening social connections and learning technical skills, its risk cannot be ignored. It is a platform that gives youngsters an opportunity to express themselves without any rules and regulations. The social networking sites create a virtual environment for youngsters, where they can make ‘n’ number of friends as per their choices, involve in personal relations and are free to do whatever they like to, taking them far from actual reality of life. For instance, Sheeks and Birchmeier (2007) found that people who are shy but wish to be social were able to develop a closer and more satisfactory relationship with others online, compared to those who are characterized by high shyness/low sociability, low shyness/high sociability or low shyness. The lack or difficulty in self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure makes adolescents vulnerable to ills such as Facebook depression, sexting and cyberbullying which can be considered as realistic threats (Ramasubbu, 2015). Other problems such as Internet addiction, psychological distress and suicidal ideation are issues that continue to be under intense scrutiny of researchers in various studies.

Though there have been some studies on the impact of social media on youngsters, its association with the suicidal tendency and their psyche in Indian context remains unexplored. With the goal of providing relevant data about the psychological impact of social media on youngsters, the study will help in parents of youngsters, NGOs, government and society as a whole to work towards framing policies related to use of social networking sites by the youngsters. Proactive steps can be taken by mental health professionals, doctors and counsellors to reach out to people to manage suicidal tendencies.

### **1.5 Objectives of Study**

The study will examine how use of social networking sites impacts adolescents' psyche and social development. The major objectives of the study are:

- 1) To find out association (if any) between social media and suicidal ideation among the youngsters.
- 2) To ascertain relationship between use of social networking sites and psychological distress among youngsters.
- 3) To study the impact of social media on interpersonal communication of youngsters.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

Several studies in the past have suggested that there has been a rise in the number of suicidal cases among the youngsters of the country. According to the 2014 report of World Health Organization (WHO), India has the highest suicide rate in the world for the 15-to-29 age group.

Therefore, the study conducted in relation to these points will try to answer:

- Is suicidal ideation among the Indian youth is in anyway associated with the use of social media by them?
- Is online media hampering the face-to-face interpersonal skills of youngsters pursuing higher education?
- Is there any relationship between the use of social networking sites and psychological distress among the Indian youth?

Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist, & Halonen, 2008). In the virtual world, youth is living a virtual life rather than virtuous life (Bala, 2014). Indian youth between the age of 18-23 years is taken because it is considered ideal for calculating the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India by the central government.

## **1.7 Chapters**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the subject of study and explains the theme of research. Chapter 2 refers to different books, journals, research articles and digital resources relevant to subject of the study. Chapter 3 discusses research methodology such as research design, research method, statistical analysis and definitions. Chapter 4 puts a detailed account of data analysis and findings. Data and information gathered through administration of questionnaire have been analysed and interpreted in this chapter. Chapter 5 puts a summary of the research. It also puts forth some suggestions for future research and includes limitations of the present study.

## **CHAPTER-2**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter of the research work is focused on review of past researches, which have been conducted both abroad and in India. It has helped the researcher to get a deep insight and clear perspective of the field of research. An attempt has been made to use relevant literature that has direct link to the research topic. The studies which were under review during the process are bifurcated under different heads. The list is as follows:

Impact of Social Media on Youngsters`

Social Media and Suicidal Ideation

Social Media and Psychological Distress

Social Media and Interpersonal Communication

Also, a theoretical perspective has been given to the study.

## **CHAPTER-3**

### **Methodology**

Researcher used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. In the first stage, the data was evaluated using descriptive statistics. In the second stage, a quantitative data was collected in order to find if there was any association between use of social media and psychological distress among youngsters. Appropriate scientific statistical analysis procedures were followed to ensure systematic data analysis and interpretation. The result was evaluated using inferential statistics. In the third stage, interview schedules were developed and perfected in order to collect authentic primary data from experts including psychologists and counsellors. Overall,

the present study approached the problem through a systematic survey method and interview schedule method which fits into the context of the present investigation.

This study intended to examine if there was any association between the use of social media and suicidal ideations among the students pursuing higher education. On the basis of the data collected, the analysis was done for research work.

A mixed approach was adopted by the researcher to collect and analyse the data. Each objective of the research was treated using different methods as mentioned below:

Research Design for objective 1, i.e ‘Social Media and Interpersonal Communication Skill among the Students Pursuing Higher Education’: The research design that was used for this study to gather quantitative data was a cross sectional survey. The survey was a questionnaire consisting of closed ended questions that measured respondent attitudes and behaviours about social networking, such as using the sites like Facebook and Twitter. The survey was created by the researcher and was conducted online. The survey was purely on voluntary basis. Non-probability purposes sample of 200 respondents was collected. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the result.

Research Design for Objective 2: ‘Social Media and Psychological Distress among the Students Pursuing Higher Education.’ The research design that was used for this study to gather quantitative data was a cross sectional survey. Probability sampling was done. Closed ended questionnaire was administered among 350 students selected randomly. The questionnaire measured respondent attitudes and behaviours about social networking, especially sites like Facebook and Twitter. Inferential statistics was

used to analyse data. Non-parametric tests were applied to evaluate if there was any association between use of social media and stress among the respondents.

Research Design for Objective 3: ‘Social Media and Suicidal Ideation among the Students Pursuing Higher Education.’ In-depth Interview through interview schedule was conducted of five experts including psychologist, counsellor and motivational speaker as a part of qualitative technique in the triangular approach to the research. The data was collected and thereby analysed using narrative approach.

### **3.1 Method of the study**

Primary data were collected through structured, organized and standardized questionnaires and also interview schedules which were administered to the students pursuing their higher education, aged between 18-23 years. Around 500 respondents were administered the questionnaire at different stages of research.

### **3.2 Statistical Analysis**

In the first stage, descriptive statistics was used to evaluate the data collected using a cross-sectional survey method. While in the second stage, the data of the cross sectional survey was analysed using inferential statistics. Non-parametric chi-square was used. The interpretation of the chi-square analysis justify the assumption of independence which was primary carried out at the 0.05% level of significance. A brief description of the statistical tests applied are given below. Also, in the third stage the interview schedule was evaluated.

## **CHAPTER-4**

### **Data Analysis**

Data and information collected through administration of questionnaire were analysed at length. Different key areas in relation to the three research objectives have been analysed. Based on detailed analysis and interpretation of data and information gathered from the field of study, it could be inferred that-

1. Suicide stories viral on social media tend to catalyse suicidal ideation among youngsters pursuing higher education.
2. A strong association was found between 'when do you access social media' and stress. A total of 45% of the respondents said that they check their social networks 'just before sleeping' and they suffer from moderate stress.
3. A strong association was found between 'hours spend on social media' and stress. It was found that 81.8% of the respondents who spend 2 to 4 hours on social media have moderate stress.
4. A strong association was found between 'frequency of checking profile on social media' and stress. It was found that 37.4% of respondents check their social networking profile every one hour. Also, 29.4% respondents who check their profiles every half-an hour have high stress level.
5. The respondents who access their social media accounts for more than 8 hours reflected higher average stress score (25.94), while the ones who used it for less than 8 hours a day showed comparatively less stress (19.46). Also, people who check their

profiles for updates every one hour showed to be under high stress (23.39) when compared to their counterparts who do not use it daily. Youngsters who keep checking their social media profiles throughout the day are far more stressed (22.86) than those who check it only during the morning hours.

6. An association was found between 'no. of friends on social media' and stress. Around 48% of respondents said they have less than 300 friends. While, respondents having more than 1000 friends suffer from moderate level of stress.

7. It was found that respondents who value online friendship more are in high stress than their counterparts. The data clearly shows the direct proportionality between the number of friends and level of stress. In a contrast it was found that respondents those who had never met their online friends showed less stress while the others who had met most of their online friends had higher average stress score.

8. An association was found between 'social networking activities' and stress. Around 46% of the respondents said that they read, like, comment and post on social networking site. Respondents who like others' post suffer from stress.

9. A strong association was found between 'mostly post about' and stress. Around 48% said that they generally share knowledge on social media in public interest. It was found that respondents who mostly post about mood status are more stressed.

10. No association was found between gender, social media usage and stress.

11. Youngsters don't feel comfortable sharing their personal emotions on social media and would rather prefer it doing face-to-face with a person, they still take it over to vent out their grievances against someone. While social media helps one's

ability to communicate through texting, it hampers the ability to talk face-to-face, thus hampering the interpersonal communication skills of youngsters.

12. The study revealed that while youngsters often make an effort to spend time and solve conflicts with their peers face-to-face, they end up solving issues while talking to them on social media. Also, large number of respondents said that they sometimes text people who are in the same place as them rather than talking to them directly.

## **CHAPTER-5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study that aimed at finding out the association between use of social media and suicidal ideations among students pursuing higher education, found that the coverage of 'suicidal news stories' getting viral on social media tend to catalyse suicidal ideation among the youngsters. They motivate youngsters and give ideas to proceed with committing suicide to the vulnerable group of people. They impact the psyche of any individual reading or watching it. They hammer the most to the vulnerable lot which is youngsters. People who lack emotional support from family or friends or don't have a coping mechanism are vulnerable to such suicide stories. So the moment they read such kind of stories and they already have suicidal ideations, they are more likely to attempt suicide. Because now they know what are the procedure and how they can go about it. The viral stories that are being posted on social media might play a pivotal role in adding the fuel to the fire.

Use of Social media has a significant impact on the psychology of youngsters. One of the main reasons being the amount of time spent on social media leads to neglecting many other priorities of life, resulting to piling up of work. This further leads to frustration and irritable behaviour among them. Sleep deprivation is another factor leading to psychological distress among them. Also, another major reason behind psychological distress among youth using social media is 'comparison'. People generally portray their positive image on social media, no one portray their negative image. Everyone tries to make their positive image in terms of materialistic or emotional dimensions on social networking sites. Looking at others' profiles lead to dissatisfaction. This further leads to depression and anxiety. This pomp and show on social media results in inferiority complexes in individuals especially students falling in age bracket of 18-23 years.

The study also tried to analyse the impact of social media on interpersonal communication skills of youngsters. It suggests that social media is an important tool for students pursuing higher study to stay in contact with their peers and family members. It was found that though youngsters don't feel comfortable sharing their personal emotions on social media and would rather prefer it doing face-to-face with a person, they still take it over to vent out their grievances against someone/something. The study suggests that while social media helps one's ability to communicate through texting, it hampers the ability to talk face-to-face, thus hampering the interpersonal communication skills of youngsters. Interestingly, the study revealed that while youngsters often make an effort to spend time and solve conflicts with their peers face-to-face, they end up solving issues while talking to them on social media.

## **5.1 Limitation and Suggestions for Further Research**

The study found that there is an association between social media and suicidal ideation among the youngsters. Also, an association between use of social networking sites and psychological distress was found. However, it remains unclear whether too much use of social networking sites leads to psychological distress among youngsters or if youngsters who are already psychologically distressed, or undergoing depression and anxiety issues tend to use too much of social networking sites. Therefore, it is suggested that further study may be conducted to bring more clarity about the association and cause and effect relationship between the two. Similarly, the study found that use of social media impacts the interpersonal skills of youngsters. But, again it remains unclear if vice-a-versa is true or not. Therefore, further research is recommended in this regard.