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**MAPPING THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE:
USAGE PATTERNS, MOTIVATIONS, AND
BEHAVIOURS OF GEN Z STUDENTS AT
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY**

Abstract

The integration of Social Network Sites (SNSs) into the very existence of Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012) has significantly changed the domains of communication, information dissemination, and identity construction. This paper explores the patterns, reasons, and behaviours of Gen Z students at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in India who use Social Network Sites. To investigate, this paper uses both descriptive and inferential analysis. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey of 158 students at BHU has been conducted to understand deeper insights into this hyper-connected demographic community. The results show that most students use smartphones a lot, with 82.3% of them using SNSs at least once a day. Among SNSs, Instagram emerged as the most popular platform (84.8% penetration), creating a social media experience that was both visual and engaging. To use SNSs, motivations are primarily utility-based and relational, i.e., the need to interact with peers (65.2%) and to be informed about trends (62.7%), rather than the pursuit of validation (15.8%). The inferential statistics show that there are important correlations between different groups of people.

This research finds that students are knowledgeable and practical navigators of their digital realm, with their experiences shaped by demographic influences. The present paper establishes a significant statistical foundation for comprehending digital activity within Indian universities and emphasises the necessity for additional investigation into the formation and construction of online identity.

Keywords: Social Network Sites (SNSs), Identity, University Students, Digital Culture, Instagram.

The 21st century has been profoundly shaped by the rapid emergence of Social Network Sites (SNSs), platforms that redefined how humans connect on an individual level how humans form communities, and the very sense of self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For Gen Z (people born between 1997-2012) these digital surroundings that they are living in are not novel technologies but are intrinsic part of their social reality, making them “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). If we keep this generation as context, In contemporary society a university campus can serve as a critical site for exploration, where individuals navigate the transition to adulthood, form new social bonds, and engage in profound processes of identity construction (Erikson, 1968).

In the Indian context, this digital transformation is more pronounced numerically than in other countries. A report done by Forbes India notes that India has a Gen Z population of 375 million, or 37.5 crore (Jain, 2024). That makes this demography not just one of the world’s largest but also the most populous of internet users in India. Indian Gen Z is at the forefront of an ongoing socio-cultural shift, using SNSs for everything from entertainment to education to political activism and for their own individual selves. However, while trends across the globe are well-documented, there is a need for Indian context-specific, empirical study that captures the unique phenomenon of social media usage within India’s diverse and stratified landscape. Educational institutions like Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which attract students from a wide spectrum of regional, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, offer fertile ground for such inquiry.

Present literature related to social media/SNSs often adheres to generalised tropes that act as broad stereotypes, portraying youth as social media addicts and their use solely driven by a quest for validation. This paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of patterns of use of SNSs, But dealing with the complex relationship between SNSs and identity construction—a primary aim of the larger research project—it is essential first to map the foundational context, the concrete patterns of use and the underlying motivations. What platforms do the students use, how often, and on what devices? What are their primary goals and drivers for SNS engagement? Further, how do demographic variables like gender, field of study, and background influence these behaviours?

In light of the above issues, the paper has three objectives:

1. To determine the current status and extent of social media usage.
2. To explore the underlying motivations driving this usage.
3. To identify and analyse the patterns of social media engagement and test for significant demographic correlations.

For fulfilling these objectives, the researcher has used both descriptive and inferential statistics. In this manner the study tries to provide a foundation

for understanding the digital habitat of contemporary students in which identity is being formed. It seeks to move beyond assumptions and provide a data-driven portrait of a generation navigating its social world through the screens of smartphones.

Theoretical Framework

To contextualise this study and situate it firmly into the paradigms that are already explored in academia, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical frameworks and prior empirical work that illustrate the intersection of SNSs, youth culture, and identity.

Two theoretical perspectives are particularly significant for this research. First, the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides a framework for understanding user motivations. One thing that social media differs from other media in is that in the case of social media, the user is both producer and consumer. So any traditional model of media effects is not applicable here. These models perceive the user as a passive receiver only. On the other hand, the theory of User and Gratification sees participants as active producers of the entire phenomenon happening on social media. The needs of Gen Z are often categorised into domains such as cognitive (acquiring information), affective (emotional experience), personal integrative (credibility and status), social integrative (connecting with family and friends), and tension release (escapism) (McQuail, 1983). This particular Theory enables us to analyse why university students use social network sites, which further allows us to test their usage and alignment with informational, social or self-status gratification that students get from the SNSs' usage.

In addition to the above theory, Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy offers a powerful lens for understanding identity performance on SNSs. Goffman's conception of social interaction as a performance, where individuals, like any other actors, manage their impression on a "front stage" while they prepare in a "backstage". The fundamentals of SNSs, features like profiles, curated photo feeds, and stories and videos, essentially create a front stage. For users, where they can carefully edit, filter, and present a version of themselves. The near-perfect versions of themselves are what scholars have termed the "curated self" (Hogan, 2010). The potential difference between this online self and the offline "real" self is a central concern of this study.

Empirical Studies on Social Media and Youth

Global research in the field of Social Media has consistently shown high rates of social media adoption among young adults. These studies indicate that platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are favoured because of their

visual nature, which further facilitates self-expression and peer comparison (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In the context of India, research by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023) indicates that there is the staggering growth of young internet users, primarily accessing digital content via smartphones. Studies conducted by Dinker (2023) have begun to explore the impact of social media on Indian youth. He notes the dual role of SNSs in providing opportunities for learning and social connection. Along with that, it creates pressures related to appearance and success.

Recent empirical work within the Indian context further nuances our understanding of social media use among youth, especially when differences of gender and geography are taken into account.

A 2025 study by LIGS University, examining social media adoption among university students, highlights clear gendered patterns in platform engagement. Using mean difference comparisons and t-tests, the study found that while male students reported higher use of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, female students demonstrated a higher overall level of social media adoption. In particular, women were more engaged with visually driven platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. The study suggests that this difference is linked to varying user motivations, where female students tend to engage more for communication and information, while male students are more inclined towards entertainment-orientated use.

This pattern is further supported by a large-scale survey conducted in 2024–2025 (ResearchGate/Opeepl India Report), which examined over 1,000 Gen Z users in India. The findings indicate that female users are not only more active overall, but also more deeply embedded in platform ecosystems. On average, female users engaged with social media more frequently per month than male users. They also showed higher participation on visual and short-form content platforms, with significantly greater use of Instagram and Reels-style formats. This suggests that gendered differences are not limited to access, but extend to frequency, intensity, and the nature of engagement.

At the same time, geographic location emerges as another important factor shaping social media behaviour. A 2024 study by Nivetha and Radha, focusing on undergraduate women in urban and rural India, highlights how patterns of use vary across contexts. While urban students were more likely to use social media for networking, self-expression, and visibility, rural students tended to use these platforms for learning and accessing information that might otherwise be unavailable to them. This points to a more layered understanding of the so-called “digital divide”, where differences lie not only in access but also in purpose and experience.

Taken together, these studies suggest that Gen Z cannot be understood as a uniform digital category. Instead, their engagement with social media

is shaped by underlying social factors such as gender and location, which influence both how and why these platforms are used.

However, a significant gap remains in the existing literature regarding focused, empirical studies that employ statistical testing to examine how different demographics influence SNS use within a particular setup like a university. Much of the existing literature deals with mainly anecdotal evidence. This paper tries to fill this gap by providing a detailed, data-driven profile of Gen Z.

Methodology

The paper uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for capturing a population's characteristics or attitudes at a specific point in time (Babbie, 2010). This incorporates both descriptive components to outline usage patterns and inferential components to test for significant relationships between key demographic and behavioural variables.

The target population for this paper was students enrolled in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) who also belong to Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012). A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. Data was collected from the BHU over a period of 20 days using an offline questionnaire. A total of 158 complete responses were obtained, forming the sample for this analysis. A post-hoc power analysis was conducted using G Power software. With an effect size of $w = 0.3$ (medium), $\alpha = 0.05$, and $df = 1$, the achieved power ($1-\beta$) for this sample size ($N = 158$) was approximately 0.92, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.80. This indicates that the sample size was sufficient to detect statistically significant medium-sized effects with high probability, hence reducing the likelihood of a Type II error.

Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire was developed with the use of Google Forms as well as in printed form. The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions, which included demographics, social media usage patterns, motivations, and behaviours related to identity-type questions. But for this paper, the analysis focuses on the following key sections:

Demographics: Birth year (Q1), Gender (Q2), Field of Study (Q4), and Background (Q5).

Usage Patterns: Frequency of use (Q6), Most used platforms (Q7), Primary device (Q8), and Daily time spent (Q9).

Motivations and Behaviours: Primary purpose for use (Q10), Motivation to engage with content (Q11), and Pressure to post (Q12).

The questionnaire employed a mix of multiple-choice, multiple-select, and Likert-scale questions to gather data.

Data Analysis

The data collected from online Google Forms and offline sheets was exported to IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) for comprehensive analysis. This analysis has two stages:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all categorical variables to describe the sample and its fundamental usage patterns. This provides a clear representation of the data trends.
2. **Inferential Statistics:** To test for significant relationships between categorical variables, the Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2) was conducted. This test evaluates whether the distribution of one categorical variable is different across the categories of another variable. The null hypothesis (H_0) for each test was that there is no association between the two variables in the population. A p-value of less than 0.05 ($p < .05$) was considered statistically significant, providing evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

To quantify the strength of any significant associations identified by the Chi-Square test, **Cramer's V** was calculated. Cramer's V is a measure of association between two nominal variables, with values ranging from 0 to 1. The conventional criteria for interpretation are ~0.1 (small effect), ~0.3 (medium effect), and ~0.5 (large effect). This provides an objective measure of the practical significance of the findings beyond mere statistical significance.

Findings and Analysis

This section contains the results of the data analysis, organised from general descriptive patterns to specific inferential tests.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample of 158 BHU students shows a considerably diverse demographic profile, as summarised in Table 1. The sample was predominantly male (73.4%), which may reflect the general gender distribution in certain streams at BHU or a response bias. Academically, the sample was well-distributed, with the highest representation from Humanities & Social Sciences (32.9%) and Natural & Physical Sciences (28.5%). A significant finding is the rural (46.2%) and semi-urban (24.7%) background of a large majority (70.9%) of the respondents, challenging the urban-centric narrative

often associated with intensive social media use and highlighting the digital penetration into non-urban India.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=158)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	116	73.4%
	Woman	40	25.3%
	Non-binary / Other	2	1.3%
Field of Study	Humanities & Social Sciences	52	32.9%
	Natural & Physical Sciences	45	28.5%
	Engineering & Technology	14	8.9%
	Management & Commerce	12	7.6%
	Other	35	22.2%
Background	Rural	73	46.2%
	Semi-Urban	39	24.7%
	Urban	46	29.1%

Patterns of Social Media Usage

The data reveals a picture of a deeply digitally integrated student community.

Frequency and Intensity of Use

The frequency of SNS use is remarkably high, as detailed in Table 2. Majority of students are using it on a daily basis, with 65.18% accessing SNSs “Several times a day” and a further 6.32% being “Always online.” When we combine with those who use it “Once a day” (10.75%), this indicates that 82.25% of the sample are daily users. Only a minority of respondent students (17.71%) use SNSs less frequently. This indicates an “always-on” culture among Gen Z is a deeply ingrained daily habit.

Table 2: Frequency of Social Network Site Use (Q6)

Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Several times a day	103	65.18
Once a day	17	10.75
A few times a week	20	12.65
Rarely	8	5.06
Always online	10	6.32
Total	158	100.00

Note: Percentages are rounded to two decimal places; totals may not equal 100 exactly due to rounding.

This high frequency is complemented by significant daily time investment, as shown in Table 3. Almost half of the Gen Z students (46.84%) spend between 1-3 hours on SNSs daily. A further 20.89% spend 4-6 hours, and 12.03% spend more than 6 hours. Cumulatively, 79.75% of respondents invest one hour or more of their day on social media. This significant time commitment underscores the central role SNSs play in the daily routines and time allocation of BHU students.

Table 3: Daily Time Spent on Social Network Sites (Q9)

Time Spent Daily	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	32	20.25
1–3 hours	74	46.84
4–6 hours	33	20.89
More than 6 hours	19	12.03
Total	158	100.00

Note: Percentages are rounded to two decimal places; totals may not equal 100 exactly due to rounding

Platform Dominance and Device Preference

A clear hierarchy of platforms emerged from the data, with Instagram standing as the undisputed leader. As shown in Table 4, a staggering 84.8% of respondents identified Instagram among their top three most-used platforms. This is more than three times the second most popular platforms, Facebook (24%), Twitter/X (20.9%), and LinkedIn (20.3%) respectively. The visual, ephemeral, and algorithm-driven nature of Instagram appears to perfectly align with the communicative and expressive preferences of Gen Z students.

Table 4: Most Used Social Media Platforms (Select up to 3) (Q7)

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	134	84.81
Facebook	38	24.05
Twitter/X	33	20.89
LinkedIn	32	20.25
Snapchat	13	8.23
Others	33	20.89

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as respondents could select up to three options.

This SNSs ecosystem is predominantly accessed by mobile devices. An overwhelming 94.9% of students reported using a smartphone as their primary device for social media (Q8), with only 5.1% using a laptop/desktop

or tablet. This finding confirms a mobile-first, and arguably mobile-only, paradigm. The smartphone's portability and constant connectivity facilitate the high-frequency, "anytime, anywhere" usage pattern observed, deeply embedding SNSs into the interstitial moments of student life.

Motivations for Usage

To understand Gen Z, students using SNSs is critical to interpreting its role in their lives. The present data reveals that Gen Z motivations are more pragmatic and social than performative.

Primary Purposes

When respondent were asked about their primary purposes to use social media (select all that apply), their responses, highlight the combination of entertainment and utility. Entertainment (69.6%) and accessing News & Information (64.6%) are the two dominant purposes. This was closely followed by Networking (52.5%) and Academic Purposes (48.1%), indicating that a significant portion of Gen Z students use these platforms for functional goals associated with their studies and career building. Self-Expression (27.8%) was a less common primary driver; in retrospect, that suggests that for many Gen Z consumption and connection are more central than active content creation for identity display. As these were multiple-response questions, the percentages reflect the proportion of respondents selecting each option rather than exclusive priority.

Motivations to Engage

As shown in Table 6, regarding what motivates Gen Z to interact with content (e.g., like, comment, share), it further reinforces the theme of connectivity and information-seeking. The top motivators are Connecting with peers/friends (65.2%) and Staying updated with trends (62.7%). Professional/Academic growth (51.3%) is also a strong driver. In stark contrast, the motivation of Seeking validation (likes, comments) was selected by only 15.8% of respondents, making it the least significant motivator. This is a significant finding that challenges the existing caricature of Gen Z, which is the validation-obsessed social media user. For BHU Gen Z, engagement is more about staying informed and maintaining social bonds than it is about accumulating digital approval.

**Table 6: Motivation to Engage with Social Media Content
(Multiple Response) (Q11)**

Motivation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Connecting with peers/friends	103	65.2

Table 5: Primary Purpose for Using Social Media (Multiple Response) (Q10)

Primary Purpose	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Entertainment	110	69.6
News & Information	102	64.6
Networking	83	52.5
Academic Purposes	76	48.1
Self-Expression	44	27.8

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as it was a multiple-response question.

Staying updated with trends	99	62.7
Professional/Academic growth	81	51.3
Expressing opinions & beliefs	51	32.3
Seeking validation (likes, comments)	25	15.8

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as it was a multiple-response question.

Inferential Analysis: Exploring Relationships between Variables

To uncover deeper structures within the data and move beyond mere description, we conducted Chi-Square Tests of Independence to examine relationships between demographic factors and social media behaviours.

Gender and Platform Preference

A Chi-Square Test of Independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender (Man vs. Woman, excluding 'Other' categories for a valid test) and the preference for Instagram. Among the respondents who have identified as non-binary/other ($n = 2$) were not included in this analysis to fulfil the Chi-Square assumptions regarding expected cell frequencies. The test draws a comparison between the proportion of males and females who selected Instagram versus those who did not.

The results showed a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 4.67, p = .031$. An analysis of the standardised residuals (which indicate how much the observed count differs from the expected count) revealed that women (Residual = +2.2) were significantly more likely to report Instagram as a top platform than expected by chance, while men (Residual = -1.2) were slightly less likely.

The strength of this association, as measured by Cramer's V, was 0.17, indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This suggests that while gender is a statistically significant factor in Instagram preference at BHU, the relationship is not overwhelmingly strong.

Field of Study and Primary Purpose

Upon testing the relationship between the field of study and the use of SNS for “Academic Purposes”. To ensure adequate cell counts for a robust Chi-Square test, the field of study was recoded into two categories: STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and Non-STEM (Humanities, Management, Commerce, and Other).

The Chi-Square showed a significant association: $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 5.89$, $p = .015$. The standardised residuals indicated that STEM students (Residual = +2.4) were significantly more likely to report using SNS for academic purposes. Cramer’s V for this association was 0.19, again indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This implies that students in technical and scientific fields are more inclined to utilise social media as an academic and professional tool.

Background and Feeling Pressure to Post

An analysis was conducted to determine if a student’s background was associated with feeling pressured to post certain types of content (Q12). The background variable was recategorised as Urban versus Rural/Semi-Urban (combined), and the pressure variable was recategorised as “Yes/Frequently/Sometimes” versus “Rarely/Never”.

The Chi-Square test revealed a significant association: $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 7.42$, $p = .006$. The standardised residuals showed that students from urban backgrounds (Residual = +2.7) reported feeling pressure to post more frequently than their rural and semi-urban counterparts. Cramer’s V was 0.22, indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This points to a potentially different social media culture that exists in the urban surroundings and is further experienced only by the urban Gen Z student. These students may be more embedded in networks where curated self-presentation is the norm.

Discussion

Above statistical findings depict a detailed and nuanced portrait of Gen Z students. usage at Banaras Hindu University. The discourse is beyond mere description; this discussion interprets these statistical results, trying to relate them to the broader theoretical and societal context and integrating the insights gained from inferential statistical testing.

The Hegemony of Instagram and the Mobile-First Self

The overarching dominance of Instagram (84.8%) among SNSs is arguably the most defining characteristic of this digital world. This is not just a selection of a platform; it is more of an adoption of a specific mode of communication that is inherently visual, curated, and algorithmic. The

individual self that is constructed and presented on Instagram is one mediated through images, filters, and stories. This has profound implications for individual identity construction. It benefits aesthetic presentation, encourages a culture of visual comparison, and shapes self-narrative into a highlight reel of ephemeral “Stories” and carefully composed grid posts. In this context, the self becomes a brand that requires management (Marwick, 2013). Nearly 94.9% of individuals rely on smartphones for their SNS requirements. This creates a scenario where identity performance is not just confined to a desktop in a private settings room but is a portable, continuous, and integrated part of everyday life. The “front stage”, as articulated by Goffman’s term, is portably carried in one’s pocket, always accessible for performance or audience monitoring.

The “Informed Connector”: Utility over Validation

The single most compelling finding of this paper is the clear pattern of motivations that prioritises utility and connection over external validation. The statistics of using SNSs for “News & Information” (64.6%), “Staying updated with trends” (62.7%), and “Professional/Academic growth” (51.3%) position these students as “informed connectors”. Gen Z are actively using these platforms as tools to navigate their academic, professional, and social worlds. This closely aligns with the cognitive and social integrative gratifications of Uses and Gratifications theory previously discussed.

The significantly low emphasis on “Seeking validation” (15.8%) is a corrective to the popularly held description of Gen Z. It suggests that BHU students, being active participants, may possess a more critical and utilitarian approach to SNSs. Their engagement is less about a fragile ego dependent on likes but more about a practical use of a powerful informational and social network. This finding further pushes researchers and academicians to move beyond simplistic narratives of vanity and anxiety and recognise the strategic, resource-orientated ways in which this demographic leverages digital tools.

The Performance of Identity: Acknowledging the Curated Self

While the previous points are grounded on data related to motivations and platforms, they also reveal a critical insight about identity. The architecture of Instagram and the time invested in these platforms naturally lead to questions about authenticity. Although this paper focuses on descriptive patterns, one conclusion from the data offers a powerful preliminary glimpse into identity perception. Although not tabulated in the earlier tables, responses to the identity perception question revealed that only 30.7% of students reported no difference between their real-life personality and their social media persona. The majority, 50.7%, reported being “Slightly different”, and 18.7% stated “Completely different”. This means that 69.4% of respondents consciously

acknowledge a disconnect between their online and offline selves.

This is a clear empirical indicator of identity performance in action, which strongly supports a Goffmanian interpretation. Students are not simply transposing their offline identity online; they are meticulously curating, editing, and performing a version of themselves specifically tailored for the digital “front stage”. This performance should not necessarily be negative; it can be a natural part of identity exploration. However, it evidently demonstrates that for a large majority, the online self is a managed project. This finding creates a crucial bridge for the next phase of this research, which will further examine the ‘managed project’, mechanisms and psychological impacts of this identity work.

Statistical Nuances: Demographics Shape Digital Behavior

By employing inferential analysis, it adds an extra layer of precision, revealing that the overall patterns are not monolithic but are infused by demographic characteristics. The use of Chi-Square tests allows us to state these relationships with statistical confidence. Given the near-ubiquitous adoption of Instagram across the sample, the observed gender association reflects a relative difference in likelihood rather than exclusive or polarised platform use.

The significant association between gender and Instagram preference ($\chi^2(1)=4.67$, $p=.031$, $V=0.17$) aligns with global research suggesting that visual platforms like Instagram often have a higher appeal among women, potentially due to differing socialisation patterns and communication styles (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). This finding suggests that the “visual identity economy” of Instagram is gendered at BHU, with female students being more active participants in this specific mode of self-presentation.

Additionally, the link between field of study and academic use of SNS ($\chi^2(1)=5.89$, $p=.015$, $V=0.19$) indicates that STEM students are more actively integrating these platforms into their educational and professional development. This could be because STEM fields have a strong culture of using online platforms like LinkedIn for networking and engaging with key influencers and journals on Twitter/X; they also access tutorial content on YouTube, which they broadly classify under “social media” in the survey. This correlation reflects a pragmatic engagement of digital tools to meet their daily academic and professional needs.

The most significant social finding is the correlation between background and perceived pressure to post ($\chi^2(1)=7.42$, $p=.006$, $V=0.22$). The moderate effect size indicates that students from urban backgrounds experience a distinctively different pressure-cooked environment on SNS. This may be attributed to a more known culture of social comparison, higher exposure to influencer content, or stronger peer networks that are deeply

associated with curated online personas. This particular result opens up important questions about the digital divide, which is primarily about access to the internet and related resources. But it's also about the psychological burdens and social expectations associated with the easy availability

The Paradox of High Engagement and Nuanced Impact

The data presents a potential paradox: students are investing significant time and cognitive energy in these platforms (high frequency, long duration), yet their motivations are largely functional rather than deeply emotional or validation-seeking. This indicates a complex, perhaps ambivalent, relationship with SNSs. They are indispensable tools for connectivity and information. The act of maintaining a curated persona (as acknowledged by 69.4%) and the demographic-specific pressures (as revealed by the inferential analysis) carry their own cognitive load. This duality of SNSs as both a utility and a stage for performance characterises the contemporary student experience. Gen Z are sharp navigators of this digital space; however, this navigation requires continuous negotiation between authenticity (who you are) and social expectation (who you can be) and between consuming information and managing one's own digital footprint, with these negotiations being shaped by their gender, field of study, and background.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to map the social media landscape for Gen Z students at Banaras Hindu University, and the data-driven descriptive results provide a clear profile of the cohort in focus that is further enhanced by statistical testing. The typical BHU student in this sample is a frequent, daily user of social media, primarily accessing visual-based platforms like Instagram on their smartphone for over an hour each day. Their engagement is driven not by a thirst for validation but by a desire to stay informed, connect with peers, and grow their academic and professional interests. Furthermore, most of them are aware that their online presence is a curated performance, distinct in some way from their offline self.

The incorporation of inferential statistics, specifically Chi-Square tests and Cramer's V, has allowed this paper to move beyond mere description to identify statistically significant correlations between different variables like gender, background, and field of study. We can state with confidence that at BHU, gender, field of study, and background are not just demographic characteristics but are meaningful factors that shape how students engage with and experience social media. Women show a greater inclination for Instagram, next STEM students are more likely to utilise SNSs for academic advancement, and urban student respondents find significantly more

pressure to curate their online content. These findings give a more precise and objective foundation for understanding the digital habitat of the modern Gen Z student.

The implications of these results can be multifaceted. For instant university administrators, it is imperative to highlight the need to integrate digital literacy programmes that go beyond safety warnings, teaching students to critically engage with the curated realities they consume and produce, while being mindful of the different pressures faced by various student groups. For mental health professionals, it underscores the importance of addressing the pressures associated with identity performance and constant social comparison, particularly for students from urban backgrounds. For researchers, this study provides a statistical baseline for upcoming future longitudinal or comparative studies that can be measured.

This paper does have its own limitations. The use of a convenience sample from a single university means the findings cannot be generalised to all Indian or even Uttar Pradesh Gen Z students or even to all BHU students. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design identifies patterns and associations but cannot establish causality.

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