

SHODH SAMAGAM

ISSN : 2581-6918 (Online), 2582-1792 (PRINT)



Social Media Use and Mental Well-Being among Tribal Youth in Bastar: A Social Work Perspective

**Digeshwar Sahu, Ph.D., School of Studies in Social Work
Shaheed Mahendra Karma Vishwavidyalaya, Bastar, Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA**

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Digeshwar Sahu, Ph.D.

E-mail : digesh.sahu98@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

Received on : 08/07/2026
Revised on : 09/09/2026
Accepted on : 18/09/2026
Overall Similarity : 04% on 10/09/2026



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ABSTRACT

India's digital transformation has extended internet access to tribal youth in central India, yet the psychological correlates of their online engagement remain poorly documented. This paper synthesises published secondary data on social media use, problematic internet use, internet-related harms, and psychological distress among Indian youth, with particular attention to tribal populations, and distils the implications for social work practice in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. A desk-based thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed studies (2014–2026) shows that problematic internet use among Indian students ranges from roughly 7% to over 50% across regions and instruments (Dhamnetiya et al., 2021; Saraf et al., 2025); that cyber bullying victimisation significantly predicts later depression and suicidal ideation, with female adolescents at roughly three times the odds of ideation (Maurya et al., 2022); and that tribal college students report strikingly high rates of depressive symptoms (57.04%), loneliness (62.19%), and suicidal ideation or attempts (39.16%) (Karuturi & Kandi, 2024). No published study located in this synthesis links digital media use to psychological distress among tribal youth in Bastar a significant gap for a district marked by low connectivity, scarce mental health services, and rapid smartphone diffusion. The paper recommends school-based digital well-being curricula, community-level cyber-safety and psychoeducation, and a primary research agenda to generate local evidence.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Problematic Internet Use, Psychological Distress, Tribal Youth, Social Work.

INTRODUCTION

India's digital transformation has reached even its remotest districts: cheap mobile data, affordable smart phones, and vernacular content have extended internet access across socioeconomic strata (Sarwatay et al., 2021), and more than two-thirds of internet users in India are aged 12–29, making adolescents and young adults the primary consumers of digital media (Maurya et al., 2022). Tribal youth, historically among the most disconnected populations, are entering social media platforms at scale often without the digital literacy, parental mediation, or institutional guidance that characterizes urban environments (Arya & Kumar, 2025).

A growing body of global evidence links heavy and problematic social media engagement with poorer mental health, although findings remain methodologically heterogeneous (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). In India, estimates of problematic internet use vary widely across regions and instruments (Dhamnetiya et al., 2021; Saraf et al., 2025), and internet addiction has been associated with significantly higher scores on measures of depression, anxiety, and impulsivity (Bisen & Deshpande, 2019). Simultaneously, Scheduled Tribe populations continue to face structural digital exclusion rooted in geographical isolation, poverty, low literacy, and weak institutional reach (Ramakrishnappa, 2022), and digitalization without accompanying infrastructure and skills has itself been described as a new horizon of social exclusion (Ziipao, 2023).

Bastar, where over 65% of the population belongs to Scheduled Tribes such as the Gond, Maria, Muriya, and Bhatra (Shankar et al., 2018), over 75% of the land is under forest cover (Sinha et al., 2016), and mental health services are demonstrably scarce (Thakur et al., 2024), offers a critical setting for examining this convergence. Studies of tribal student populations report high rates of depressive symptoms, loneliness, and suicidal ideation (Karuturi & Kandi, 2024), yet almost no research examines how digital media use relates to these vulnerabilities. This paper synthesises the available secondary data on social media use, problematic internet use, and psychological distress among Indian youth with particular attention to tribal populations and derives practice and policy implications for social work in Bastar.

Review of Literature

1. **Social Media use and Psychological Distress:** A systematic review of 13 studies found that social media exposure operates through four domains time spent, activity, investment, and addiction each associated with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, while cautioning that cross-sectional designs limit causal inference (Keles et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of 18 studies ($n = 9,269$) reported summary correlations of $r = 0.273$ with depression, $r = 0.348$ with anxiety, and $r = 0.313$ with stress (Shannon et al., 2022); broader screen-time reviews reach comparable conclusions (Santos et al., 2023). Indian evidence mirrors these patterns. Among 1,600 college students, those classified as internet-addicted scored significantly higher on depression, anxiety, and impulsivity, with an overall addiction prevalence of 12.5% (Bisen & Deshpande, 2019). In a northeastern district, 55.7% of college students were at risk of problematic internet use, with male gender, rural background, and lower household income significantly associated with higher scores (Saraf et al., 2025) findings of direct relevance to tribal contexts. Studies of medical students in Delhi similarly document substantial problematic internet use (Dhamnetiya et al., 2021).
2. **Internet-related Harms:** A three-year Indian cohort found that cyberbullying victimisation significantly predicted depression and suicidal ideation, with female participants at roughly three times the odds of ideation (Maurya et al., 2022). An Indian school-based sample reported a 32.4% prevalence of cyberbullying victimisation (Parappil et al., 2026), and narrative reviews document severe psychological sequelae alongside rising incidence (Vijayarani et al., 2024). A recent study found little association between parental rule-setting and cyber-victimization ($r = 0.039$) (Tamarana et al., 2025), suggesting that digital harms cannot be managed through household regulation alone. For tribal populations, the digital divide compounds risk: restricted access, lower digital literacy, and minimal institutional awareness of online harms have been documented, with tribal women remaining largely disconnected while those who connect do so amid infrastructural and educational deficits (Arya & Kumar, 2025).

3. **Mental Health of Tribal Youth:** The mental health burden among tribal adolescents appears markedly higher than in general populations. Among 291 tribal college students in Araku Valley, the prevalence of depressive symptoms was 57.04%, loneliness 62.19%, and suicidal ideation or attempts 39.16% (Karuturi & Kandi, 2024). In Chhattisgarh, tribal populations face socioeconomic disadvantage, high substance-use rates, and significant barriers to formal mental health care, prompting calls for community-based, culturally integrated service delivery (Thakur et al., 2024); qualitative work among particularly vulnerable tribal groups confirms distinctive stressors (Aswathy & Kumar, 2025). Yet none of this literature positions digital media as a correlate of tribal youth distress the gap this synthesis addresses.
4. **Measurement Considerations:** The three-factor structure of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 has been replicated across adolescent samples in multiple countries (Mellor et al., 2014), with consistently high internal consistency (Le et al., 2017); Indian studies commonly double item sums per the standard scoring convention (Kumar et al., 2019), and scholars caution that the DASS-21 measures symptom severity rather than clinical diagnosis (Tekkalaki & Andrade, 2024). Young's Internet Addiction Test remains the dominant instrument in Indian student populations (Bisen & Deshpande, 2019), and smartphone addiction scales have shown acceptable reliability in Indian samples (e.g., SAS-SV $\alpha = 0.747$) (Bh et al., 2025).

Problem

The convergence of rapid digital diffusion and high baseline psychological vulnerability among tribal youth creates an urgent but unexamined social work concern. The district of Bastar combines predominantly tribal demography (Shankar et al., 2018), scarce mental health provision (Thakur et al., 2024), and growing smartphone penetration, yet no published secondary or primary study has examined the association between digital media use and psychological distress in this population.

Objectives

- (i) To synthesise published secondary data on social media use, problematic internet use, and internet-related harms among Indian youth;
- (ii) To document the psychological distress burden among tribal youth;
- (iii) To identify the gap in evidence specific to Bastar; and
- (iv) To derive social work practice, policy, and research implications.

Research Questions

What do the available data indicate about the prevalence of problematic internet use and internet-related harms among Indian youth? What is documented about the psychological distress burden of tribal youth? And what social work responses are indicated for digital well-being among tribal youth in Bastar?

Methodology

A desk-based secondary-data synthesis was adopted. Peer-reviewed studies and policy analyses published between 2014 and 2026 were identified through structured searches of academic databases using terms such as “problematic internet use”, “internet addiction”, “social media”, “cyberbullying”, “tribal youth”, “adolescent mental health”, and “India”. Sources were screened for relevance to (a) digital media use and psychological distress among Indian adolescents and young adults, and (b) mental health among tribal populations. Studies meeting these criteria were synthesized thematically, with reported statistics presented exactly as published and attributed to their sources throughout. No raw data were re-analyzed. The principal limitations are the reliance on published figures, the concentration of the Indian evidence in student samples, and the absence of Bastar-specific empirical data, which the paper addresses by framing its conclusions as provisional and by proposing a primary research agenda.

Findings: Secondary-Data Synthesis

1. **Problematic Internet use Among Indian Youth is Substantial and Unevenly Distributed:** The reviewed studies report prevalences ranging from roughly 7% to over 50% depending on region and instrument (Dhamnetiya et al., 2021; Saraf et al., 2025). The two most directly comparable Indian estimates 12.5% internet addiction among 1,600 college students (Bisen & Deshpande, 2019) and

55.7% at-risk problematic internet use in a northeastern district (Saraf et al., 2025) illustrate the heterogeneity documented across populations and measures. Higher risk is consistently associated with male gender, rural background, and lower household income (Saraf et al., 2025), a profile that aligns closely with the demographic realities of tribal Bastar.

2. **Internet-related Harms Cluster among Young Users and Predict Distress:** The cohort evidence that cyberbullying victimisation predicts later depression and suicidal ideation with female adolescents at approximately three times the odds of ideation (Maurya et al., 2022) is among the strongest longitudinal findings in the Indian literature. School-based prevalence of 32.4% (Parappil et al., 2026) and the negligible protective association of parental rule-setting ($r = 0.039$) (Tamarana et al., 2025) together indicate that online harms constitute a population-level risk requiring institutional, not merely familial, responses.
3. **Tribal Youth Carry a High Baseline Psychological Burden:** The Araku Valley study the closest available tribal analogue reports depressive symptoms in 57.04% of tribal college students, loneliness in 62.19%, and suicidal ideation or attempts in 39.16% (Karuturi & Kandi, 2024). Chhattisgarh-specific scholarship documents barriers to care and calls for community-based delivery (Aswathy & Kumar, 2025; Thakur et al., 2024). When this baseline burden is combined with the documented association between digital exposure and distress (Keles et al., 2019; Shannon et al., 2022), the vulnerability profile of tribal youth in Bastar becomes a pressing concern though the direct linkage remains unstudied.
4. **Bastar: A Contextual Intersection:** Bastar's predominantly tribal demography (Shankar et al., 2018), extensive forest cover and geographical isolation (Sinha et al., 2016), limited connectivity and weak institutional reach (Ramakrishnappa, 2022; Ziipao, 2023), and scarce mental health services (Thakur et al., 2024) define a setting in which digital inclusion and digital risk are arriving simultaneously, without the protective infrastructure of literacy, mediation, and services documented in urban contexts (Arya & Kumar, 2025; Sarwatay et al., 2021).

Table 1: Key secondary indicators extracted from reviewed sources

Indicator	Statistic	Population / context	Source
Internet addiction prevalence	12.5%	1,600 college students, India	(Bisen & Deshpande, 2019)
At-risk problematic internet use	55.7%	College students, northeastern district	(Saraf et al., 2025)
Cyberbullying victimisation	32.4%	School adolescents, Kochi	(Parappil et al., 2026)
Meta-analytic association with depression / anxiety / stress	$r = 0.273 / 0.348 / 0.313$	18 studies, 9,269 participants	(Shannon et al., 2022)
Parental rules and cyber-victimisation	$r = 0.039$	Indian adolescents	(Tamarana et al., 2025)
Depressive symptoms in tribal students	57.04%	291 tribal college students, Araku Valley	(Karuturi & Kandi, 2024)
Loneliness in tribal students	62.19%	Same sample	(Karuturi & Kandi, 2024)
Suicidal ideation or attempts in tribal students	39.16%	Same sample	(Karuturi & Kandi, 2024)

Discussion

The secondary data converge on three conclusions relevant to social work in Bastar. First, problematic internet use and internet-related harms are meaningfully associated with psychological distress among Indian youth, with the strongest meta-analytic correlations reported for anxiety ($r = 0.348$) (Shannon et al., 2022) and the most compelling longitudinal evidence pointing to cyberbullying victimisation as a predictor of depression and suicidal ideation (Maurya et al., 2022). Second, tribal youth carry a disproportionately high baseline psychological burden (Karuturi & Kandi, 2024), which the digital risk factors documented nationally may amplify although the absence of tribal-specific digital mental health research means this remains a hypothesis rather than an established finding. Third, the protective scaffolding available to urban adolescents digital literacy, parental mediation,

institutional awareness (Sarwatay et al., 2021) is precisely what is absent in tribal contexts (Arya & Kumar, 2025; Ramakrishnappa, 2022; Ziipao, 2023).

Causality cannot be inferred from the synthesized cross-sectional evidence (Keles et al., 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020); reverse pathways, in which distressed youth withdraw into digital spaces, are plausible and require longitudinal testing. The heterogeneity of Indian prevalence estimates (Dhamnetiya et al., 2021; Saraf et al., 2025) also cautions against generalizing any single figure to Bastar. These caveats notwithstanding, the convergence of evidence gives social workers a defensible warrant for precautionary, protective intervention while local evidence is generated.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work

- **Practice:** Digital well-being curricula combining digital literacy, emotional regulation, and cyber-safety skills should be embedded in Ashram and residential tribal schools. Community-level workers, including Anganwadi workers and trained peer educators, may be prepared for basic identification of digital and psychological difficulties, psychoeducation, and referral, a clearly bounded role that does not imply clinical first-line treatment.
- **Policy:** Digital inclusion initiatives should be paired with digital protection measures: community internet centres, vernacular cyber-safety content in Gondi and Halbi, accessible helplines, and visible reporting mechanisms (Sarwatay et al., 2021). Digital mental health interventions carry promise for geographically isolated youth (Lehtimäki et al., 2021), but may not automatically bridge the divide for digitally marginalized young people (Piers et al., 2022); hybrid delivery mediated by trusted local adults is recommended.
- **Research:** Primary studies in Bastar a structured survey using validated instruments with psychometric validation for tribal adolescents are urgently needed, alongside longitudinal designs to establish temporal ordering.

CONCLUSION

The synthesized secondary data indicate that problematic internet use and internet-related harms are associated with psychological distress among Indian youth, and that tribal youth in Bastar, who carry a high baseline psychological burden amid scarce services, are likely to be exposed to these risks without protective supports. The evidence gap specific to Bastar is itself a finding: digital well-being has not yet entered the tribal social work agenda. The field can no longer treat tribal youth as outside the digital conversation; it must instead ensure that their participation in digital spaces does not come at the cost of their mental health.

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