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Between Connection and Conformity: The Complex Interplay of Social Media and Adolescent Identity in India

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Abstract

We are living in an era where digital landscapes are not merely shaping but defining our consciousness. Social media emerges as both a tool of empowerment and a conduit of alienation, particularly for Indian adolescents navigating its complex terrains. This essay undertakes a philosophical exploration of the ways in which social media content and influencer culture shape adolescent psyches, with a focus on class disparity. Drawing on data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023) and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2017-18), the essay examines the dissonance between digital access and social stratification, revealing how social media serves as both a space of aspiration and a site of exclusion.

The essay integrates two critical case studies to illustrate these dynamics. The first examines how online bullying and digital ridicule pushed a teenager into psychological distress, highlighting the ways in which adolescents absorb and replicate the linguistic and behavioral patterns of social media influencers. The second explores an incident where a teenager, having internalized political mobilization tactics from digital platforms, impersonated a classmate to fabricate a terror threat—an act revealing how ideological frameworks in digital spaces blur the boundaries between personal grievance and performative politics.

Through these lenses, the essay critiques the commodification of identity and its consequences on adolescent aspirations, psychological well-being, and educational equity. Finally, it advocates for an epistemological shift in digital literacy frameworks, urging policy interventions that move beyond surface-level regulation to cultivate critical engagement with digital culture.

Introduction

Social media has been hailed and heralded as the great equalizer by governments and corporate alike. However like any other structure of hegemony, it also entrenches existing social hierarchies. The emergence of influencer culture, fueled by algorithmic economies, creates aspirational narratives that are accessible to some yet illusory for many. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) elucidates, cultural capital determines one's social mobility, and in the digital age, this capital is increasingly mediated by one's ability to navigate social media landscapes. This essay scrutinizes the class-divergent experiences of Indian adolescents in their engagement with digital spheres, drawing upon reports by secondary sources.

Methodology

This essay adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology that weaves together sociological theory, philosophical inquiry, and critical media analysis. Rather than presenting data as detached abstraction, it treats digital experiences as lived realities—shaped by class, culture, and cognition.

1. Secondary Data as Socio-Digital Topography

The research draws from publicly available datasets and institutional reports by IAMAI (2023), NSSO (2017-18), and ASER (2023). These sources are not simply cited but read as cultural texts, tracing the contours of India's digital divide, its class entrenchments, and the silent codes of access and exclusion.

2. Case Studies as Critical Windows

The two case studies presented are based on publicly available media reports and are used solely for illustrative and analytical purposes within a broader socio-philosophical framework. All identifiable details have been anonymized, and no personal or sensitive information beyond that reported in the public domain has been included. The cases are interpreted as cultural texts, not for clinical or forensic analysis, but to explore broader patterns of digital influence, adolescent identity formation, and structural inequities. Care has been taken to present these cases with sensitivity, to avoid sensationalism, and to maintain academic and ethical integrity in line with APA guidelines for the ethical use of secondary data (APA, 2020).

3. Theoretical anchoring

The essay is scaffolded by the insights of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) on cultural capital, Jean Baudrillard (1981) on hyperreality, and W.G. Runciman (1966) on relative deprivation. These thinkers serve as interpretive lenses, helping unpack the symbolic violence, aspirational mimicry, and psychological dissonance embedded in adolescent digital life.

This methodology does not claim neutrality. It acknowledges that every reading of data is shaped by moral and political concern. It asks not only how adolescents use digital media, but how digital culture, in turn, uses them.

The expansion of affordable smart phones and data services has led to an unprecedented rise in adolescent social media users. However, as per the NSSO (2017-18), nearly 85% of rural adolescents lack consistent digital access. This asymmetry generates a bifurcated reality where private school students effortlessly assimilate global digital trends while their government school counterparts remain peripheral consumers. This unequal access to internet infrastructure contributes significantly to disparities in educational outcomes across socioeconomic groups.

This has also led to a culture where private schools in urban areas increasingly intertwine education with digital presence, “encouraging” teachers and parents to participate in their online narrative. Teachers find themselves not just as educators but as curators of a school’s image, gently steered toward sharing moments that reflect institutional prestige. Parents, too, encounter an unspoken expectation to amplify this image through their networks. In this quiet orchestration, personal and professional identities merge with promotional imperatives, raising questions about the evolving nature of labor, consent, and the shifting boundaries between community engagement and institutional self-preservation.

While social media possesses the potential to democratize knowledge, its accessibility remains contingent on material resources. Privileged adolescents, equipped with high-speed internet and exposure to international curricula, cultivate digital fluency, whereas marginalized students experience intermittent and often censored engagement with online platforms. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (2023) reports that only 35% of students in low-income households have personal devices for uninterrupted digital engagement, further restricting their ability to cultivate digital literacy.

In rural India, government teachers increasingly turn to social media to share glimpses of their work with marginalized children, not merely as a reflection of dedication but as a quiet assertion of presence in an overlooked system. While these narratives bring visibility, they also invite reflection on whether the growing reliance on digital storytelling subtly shape which aspects of education are valued? As moments of learning are curated for a wider audience, one wonders whether the quiet, everyday rhythms of teaching risk being overshadowed by what is most readily seen and shared.

The Culture of Influence and Its Silent Reverberations

The omnipresence of influencers engenders an era of hyper-reality, wherein curated lives are mistaken for attainable ideals. As Baudrillard (1981) posited, media-saturated realities obscure the distinction between the real and the simulated. Indian adolescents, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, internalize these representations, fostering an existential crisis where aspirations become delusions rather than motivations. Drawing on ASER (2023) data indicating limited exposure to digital literacy in government schools, this essay interprets such environments as more vulnerable to unchecked influencer narratives.

The growing presence of uncensored content, dank humour, and irreverent expression in digital spaces subtly shapes the sensibilities of urban adolescents. While such forms of engagement offer a sense of relatability and resistance to convention, they also recalibrate perceptions of discourse, often blurring the boundaries between wit and insensitivity. As humor and expression become entwined with digital validation, there emerges a quiet shift in social interactions—where irreverence may be mistaken for authenticity, and where the nuances of respect, empathy, and consequence risk being overshadowed by the fleeting appeal of provocation.

Case Study 1: The Digital Echoes of Cruelty - Social Media and Adolescent Bullying in India

In an era where the digital world has entwined itself with the social and psychological fabric of adolescence, the power of social media extends beyond mere communication—it has become a force that shapes identities, reinforces hierarchies, and, at times, amplifies cruelty. What was once confined to the walls of a classroom or the whispers of a school corridor now finds permanence in the boundless expanse of the internet. This case study reflects upon the tragic suicide of a 14-year-old student from Kerala, India, whose life became entangled in the unseen yet omnipresent grip of social media-driven bullying. His story is not merely an individual tragedy but a symptom of a deeper societal shift—one in which digital validation takes precedence over human empathy.

Background

The student, a young boy from a privileged background, studied in a prestigious private school in Kochi. As with many adolescents of his age, social media was an intrinsic part of his daily life, shaping his perceptions, interactions, and sense of self. Platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, intended as tools for connection, also became instruments of surveillance, judgment, and ridicule.

Adolescents today do not merely consume digital content; they internalize its language, its humor, and its hierarchies. Influencers, the figures once distant from the intimate world of childhood friendships now dictate social norms, from the way young people speak to how they perceive power, success, and self-worth. The humor of the internet, often sharp and irreverent, rewards those who can degrade others with wit, while cruelty, dressed in the garb of satire, earns engagement and applause. Within this digital economy, even suffering becomes a spectacle.

The Incident

On January 15, 2025, the student was found dead after falling from the 26th floor of his apartment complex. While the final act of despair belonged to him alone, the weight of his suffering had been distributed across countless digital interactions. Reports surfaced of repeated bullying, both physical and psychological, within his school. This reflects a form of domination that his peers, consciously or not, had learned from the content they consumed. He had allegedly been dragged into a washroom and assaulted, a moment of humiliation that did not dissolve in memory but instead echoed and expanded in the digital realm.

In the days following his death, the cruelty did not cease. Instead, it was immortalized through memes, disembodied humor at the expense of a life lost. One widely shared image depicted an animated figure plummeting off a cliff, accompanied by a caption mocking his final moments. His mother, in an anguished plea, spoke not only of her son's suffering but of a society that had become desensitized to pain, where even death could be turned into a joke.

Social Media and the Ritualization of Cruelty

Social media does not merely facilitate bullying, it refines it, repackages it, and normalizes it as a mode of engagement. The sharp, biting language of influencers, the performative aggression of viral content, and the competitive nature of digital spaces teach adolescents that cruelty is currency. In their quest for social capital, young minds replicate the humor, the sarcasm, and the hierarchy of the internet in their everyday interactions.

This influence is subtle but profound. The traditional bully, once confined to the playground, is now a digital-native, skilled in the lexicon of online humiliation. Insults are no longer spontaneous. They are rehearsed, borrowed from popular content creators, fine-tuned for maximum impact. The bullied, too, internalize these dynamics, often struggling with the dissonance between their online personas and their real-life vulnerabilities. In this landscape, empathy is eroded, replaced by an unspoken belief that the ability to degrade is equivalent to power.

The Psychological Toll

For those at the receiving end, the impact is not momentary, it is cyclical, ever-present, and inescapable. The walls of a home, once a refuge, provide no shelter when bullying persists in the form of endless notifications, group messages, and viral posts. Unlike traditional forms of cruelty, digital bullying does not dissipate with time, it is archived, accessible, replayed. The adolescent mind, still in the process of forming its defenses, is left defenseless against this relentless onslaught.

The student in this case, subjected to both physical aggression and digital humiliation, may have experienced a profound sense of entrapment. Without an exit from his torment, the world once full of possibility may have begun to feel like an ever-tightening noose. His tragedy is a reflection of an urgent need to reassess how we, as a society, allow the digital world to shape the inner lives of our children.

Larger Implications and the Need for Intervention

This case is not an isolated event but a reflection of a broader societal transformation in which digital spaces have reshaped the ways in which young people relate to one another. The unchecked influence of social media has led to a world where cruelty is not merely tolerated but often rewarded with visibility and engagement.

The role of influencers and content creators in shaping adolescent behavior cannot be overlooked. The language, humor, and attitudes that dominate digital culture set the tone for how young people perceive their own social interactions. Sarcasm, irreverence, and competitive cruelty have become the markers of social capital, leaving little room for vulnerability or kindness. Those who wield influence in these spaces must recognize the responsibility that comes with their platform, understanding that the rhetoric they promote does not exist in a

vacuum but seeps into the everyday conduct of their audience. Without a conscious effort to instill ethical engagement, the next generation may continue to inherit an internet where degradation is mistaken for wit and dominance for intelligence.

This case is more than a singular tragedy. It is an indictment of a culture that has allowed entertainment to overshadow empathy, where children are learning to measure the worth of a person in digital engagement rather than human dignity. The adolescent mind, still delicate, is caught in a world that does not forgive vulnerability, where suffering is reduced to spectacle. If we are to prevent further loss, we must move beyond surface-level solutions and address the philosophical crisis at the heart of this issue—how do we raise a generation that values kindness over cruelty in an era that rewards the opposite?

Case Study 2: The Digital Unconscious and the Perils of Mimetic Conflict

Introduction

The adolescent mind is a terrain of evolving identity, a space where familial, educational, and increasingly digital influences converge to shape thought and action. In this liminal phase of self-construction, social media has emerged not merely as a tool of communication but as an architect of perception. The digital world does not present reality as it is but as a spectacle, where narratives are crafted to provoke, divide, and manipulate. Adolescents, still forming their ethical and political consciousness, often absorb these narratives uncritically, mistaking performance for participation and rhetoric for reason.

In one such instance, a teenager from Uttar Pradesh, caught in a personal conflict with a classmate, did not engage in direct confrontation but instead turned to digital tools of deception. Creating a false identity in his classmate's name, he issued a fabricated terror threat against a religious gathering, a decision that, in his youthful imagination, may have seemed like a mere extension of online discourse. Yet, in the real world, it carried the weight of law, morality, and irrevocable consequence. This case is not an isolated lapse in judgment but a reflection of a broader cultural shift where social media not only mediates adolescent experience but instructs it, teaching the young to wield symbols, identities, and ideologies as weapons in conflicts they scarcely understand.

Background

The teenager in question was a student in a conventional schooling system, where academic rigor coexisted with the omnipresence of digital engagement. His exposure to political narratives was not shaped by books, discourse, or lived experience but by the algorithmic structures of social media where ideological battles unfold in the form of virality, outrage, and spectacle. The logic of the digital world, favoring the provocative over the reflective, conditions young minds to believe that power lies in the ability to manipulate perception.

What began as an interpersonal discord between two classmates became entangled in the broader ideological scripts that dominate online spaces. The student, perhaps unconsciously, replicated the patterns he had observed. Pattern where identity is not an intrinsic reality but a tool that can

be framed, distorted, and weaponized. In fabricating a terror threat under the guise of his peer, he was not merely retaliating against a perceived slight but enacting a digital ritual of dominance; an act mirroring the performative aggression celebrated in online spheres.

The Incident

When the fabricated threat surfaced, it was met with the full force of institutional response. Security agencies, attuned to the gravity of such statements in an era of heightened vigilance, initiated immediate investigations. The identity behind the digital act unraveled swiftly, revealing not a shadowy extremist but a schoolboy entangled in his own web of mimicry.

Upon confrontation, the teenager confessed his motivations rooted not in ideological conviction but in personal grievance. Yet, the medium through which he sought retribution was telling. His act was not an invention of his own mind but an extension of the discursive violence he had internalized from digital spaces. The internet had conditioned him to perceive identity as something fluid, malleable, and exploitable for strategic advantage. In impersonating his classmate, he did not merely seek revenge, he played a role in a larger narrative of suspicion and power, one that he had absorbed without reflection.

The Digital Imitation of Political Warfare

The adolescent mind is inherently mimetic; it learns through observation, absorbing the behaviors, language, and moral frameworks presented to it. Social media accelerates this process, offering a constant stream of content that rewards extremity and vilifies nuance. In such an environment, young individuals do not simply consume information; they embody it, acting out the ideologies they see enacted before them.

Political mobilization, once a process of collective deliberation and historical consciousness, is now increasingly reduced to an aesthetic, a series of gestures and slogans that generate engagement but lack depth. Adolescents, drawn into this digital performance, begin to mirror the tactics they encounter. They learn that identities can be manipulated, that fear can be engineered, and that power is often wielded through deception rather than truth. The teenager in this case did not invent his strategy; he merely borrowed from the playbook of digital propaganda, applying its methods to a personal conflict, unaware that the spectacle he was enacting had consequences beyond his control.

Psychological and Social Consequences

For the victim, the classmate whose identity was falsified, the implications are profound. To be implicated in a fabricated act of terror is not merely an administrative burden but a psychic wound, one that reshapes one's sense of safety and belonging. In a world where digital records outlive the moment of their creation, such an accusation lingers, forming a shadow that may stretch into future opportunities and relationships.

For the perpetrator, the realization of his actions came not as a gradual moral awakening but as an abrupt collision with institutional authority. What may have seemed to him a tactical

maneuver, one in line with the digital logic of humiliation and control was met with the cold reality of legal consequence. His case illustrates a critical failure in contemporary upbringing: young individuals are taught how to navigate digital spaces, but they are rarely taught how to comprehend their ethical weight. They are fluent in the language of political spectacle but illiterate in the philosophy of responsibility.

This case is not simply an instance of individual misjudgment but a reflection of a deeper crisis in digital culture. The adolescent brain, shaped by an ecosystem that prizes reaction over contemplation, is increasingly drawn into performative battles that obscure the real consequences of action. The challenge ahead is not merely to prevent such incidents but to reframe how young minds engage with both digital and real world. Without a shift towards ethical awareness, society risks raising a generation fluent in the language of digital manipulation but estranged from the moral weight of their own choices.

The Substance of Expression and Its Influence on Adolescent Perception

Social media presents a spectrum of content, ranging from pedagogical resources to algorithmically amplified misinformation. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), the rise in algorithmically amplified misinformation presents serious challenges to youth education and civic engagement, particularly among users with limited digital literacy. Reports by the Oxford Internet Institute (2022) indicate that misinformation is 70% more likely to be consumed by users with lower digital literacy, exacerbating socio-political polarization among youth.

In a quiet acknowledgment of the digital world's influence, CBSE inscribed a warning against social media rumors on the student's admit cards, categorizing them as **Unfair Means (UFM)**. This subtle yet significant move reflects a shifting reality—where truth and falsehood no longer emerge solely from authority but are shaped in the currents of online discourse. By addressing misinformation within the framework of academic integrity, the system recognizes that credibility itself must now be safeguarded not just in examination halls, but in the intangible realm of digital perception.

The Mind, Market Forces, and the Burden of Consumption

The socio-psychological consequences of this digital schism are profound. Adolescents subjected to the relentless display of affluence on social media often grapple with 'relative deprivation' (Runciman, 1966), a psychological state where individuals perceive themselves as disadvantaged compared to their peers. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR, 2023) reports a significant rise in anxiety and depressive disorders among adolescents, particularly in economically weaker sections, due to social media-induced self-comparison.

However, the effects are not limited to the underprivileged. Middle-class adolescents, caught between the desire for upward mobility and the pressures of maintaining a curated digital presence, experience heightened stress and burnout. Their constant engagement with influencer culture fosters unrealistic expectations, often leading to self-doubt and perfectionist tendencies.

Meanwhile, adolescents from affluent backgrounds face the burden of hyper-visibility—wherein the pressure to maintain elite social standards and digital personas leads to social alienation, performance anxiety, and, in extreme cases, digital fatigue. The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS, 2023) warns that across class divides, adolescents struggle with the psychological ramifications of social media, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of its impacts on mental well-being.

Social media-induced consumerism perpetuates the commodification of self-worth. The Nielsen India Digital Consumer Report (2023) highlights that influencer-driven marketing disproportionately affects low-income adolescents, who often pressure their families into unsustainable consumption patterns to conform to aspirational aesthetics. This phenomenon exacerbates socio-economic divides within school environments, fostering a materialistic hierarchy that privileges those who can afford digital trends over those who cannot.

The unequal integration of digital literacy within educational frameworks further deepens class disparities. While elite institutions incorporate comprehensive digital media analysis within curricula, government schools remain largely bereft of such initiatives due to infrastructural limitations (Ministry of Education, 2023). The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2022) suggests that such disparities in media education result in differential cognitive development among adolescents, widening the intellectual gap between socio-economic classes.

Policy Recommendations

To meaningfully address the multifaceted impact of social media on adolescent identity, policy must move beyond moral panic and techno-solutionism. It must engage with the everyday realities of Indian classrooms, homes, and digital habits. Below are pragmatic, rights-based interventions to foster critical digital consciousness without imposing blanket prohibitions:

1. Age-Sensitive Influencer Regulation

- Mandate disclosure of sponsored content aimed at adolescents under the *Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020*.
- Create a certification system (akin to the BIS hallmark) for child-safe influencer content.
- Collaborate with platforms like YouTube Kids and Instagram Youth Mode to flag and limit exploitative aspirational narratives, without encroaching on Article 19(1)(a).

2. Digital Ethics Integration in School Curricula

- Infuse digital ethics, misinformation detection, algorithmic bias, and privacy rights into the Life Skills or Citizenship Education syllabi, beginning Class VI onward.
- NCERT textbooks and DIKSHA modules should include age-appropriate case studies of online behavior consequences (anonymized) to ground abstract concepts in lived adolescent realities.

3. Ethical Communication Protocols for Schools

- Schools must declare clear Digital Image Consent Policies as part of admission forms. No image of a child should be used for promotional purposes without documented parental consent.
- Annual digital audits (via CBSE/ICSE boards) can assess how schools use student data and images, particularly in private institutions competing for online prestige.

4. Community-Led Digital Literacy Labs

- Pilot Digital Literacy Hubs within community libraries and panchayat spaces, especially in low-income and rural areas.
- Involve local teachers, adolescent peer mentors, and retired ICT professionals to conduct regular workshops on critical consumption, trolling, and privacy.

5. Hybrid Learning Models with Screen-Time Guidelines

- NEP 2020's push for tech-integrated learning must be tempered by screen-time frameworks, co-designed with pediatric and mental health experts.
- Encourage offline-first pedagogies in low-resource schools, using tech to supplement not supplant creative, dialogic, and local learning methods.

6. Digital Detox and Reflective Practice Hours

- Institutionalize a weekly "Mindful Media Hour" where students reflect on their digital lives through journaling, storytelling, theatre, or debates.
- Inspired by Australia's 2023 "Digital Detox Hour," this initiative would promote attention span recovery, emotional literacy, and resilience without enforcing total disengagement.

7. Social Media Ambassadors in Schools

- Appoint trained student digital ambassadors in every secondary school. They can be peer educators trained to support classmates in identifying online harms and cultivating healthier screen habits.
- Backed by counsellor support and a mobile helpline, these ambassadors would act as ethical liaisons between digital life and school life.

8. Mental Health & Tech Use Integration

- Collaborate with NIMHANS and ICMR to develop age-specific mental health screening tools that assess social media-related stress as part of school wellness programs.
- Create anonymous digital diaries (optional) within EdTech platforms where adolescents can log screen time, emotional triggers, and get instant feedback.

9. State-Level Adolescent Digital Wellbeing Councils

- Form interdisciplinary councils at state levels, comprising educators, adolescent representatives, psychologists, technologists, and policymakers.
- Their task: To review EdTech partnerships, flag exploitative digital practices, and draft localized media literacy curriculum every academic year.

10. Normalizing Open Dialogue on Digital Pressures

- Establish mandatory “Adolescent Voice Circles” in schools as monthly safe-space discussions where students can openly talk about their digital experiences, from cyberbullying to influencer anxiety, moderated by trained counsellors or empathetic educators.
- Integrate storytelling and arts-based pedagogy to help students externalize and critically examine their digital realities using poetry, theatre, zines, or short films as reflective tools.
- Encourage teachers and parents to participate in digital dialogue forums that demystify adolescent experiences rather than dismiss or demonize them.
- Launch a national awareness campaign titled “*Behind the Screen: What Our Children Feel*” in collaboration with NCERT and Doordarshan, showcasing real adolescent voices across regions and languages.

Conclusion

Social media’s omnipresence in adolescent life is no longer a question of access, it is a matter of identity. While these platforms offer unprecedented avenues for expression and learning, they also commodify selfhood, deepen class divisions, and blur the boundaries between performance and personhood. The digital world, in its promise of democratization, often delivers curated illusions. For the underprivileged adolescent, it becomes a stage of unreachable ideals; for the privileged, a theater of hyper-visibility and performative success. What emerges is not just a digital divide, but an existential one; a fracture in how young people come to know themselves, each other, and the world. This fracture reshapes how adolescents construct, perform, and perceive their identities. They see themselves as digital artefacts measured in likes, visibility, and conformity to algorithmic norms.

This essay does not argue for digital abstinence but for epistemic vigilance. Policymakers must go beyond regulation and invest in cultivating digital consciousness an education not just in coding or content, but in care, context, and consequence. If we fail to engage with the moral weight of our digital architectures, we risk raising a generation fluent in hashtags but estranged from empathy, skilled in storytelling yet starved of solidarity. The task ahead is not merely to reform platforms, but to reimagine how we nurture adolescent identity between connection and conformity, with integrity, imagination, and moral clarity.

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