

Digital Economy and Youth Engagement: Evaluating Budgetary Incentives for Safe and Productive Use of Social Networking Platforms

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Abstract

The rise of social networking platforms among Indian youth has profound implications on communication patterns, mental well-being, productivity, and digital identity. With the Union Budget 2024–25 advancing India's digital economy through policy and infrastructure investments, this paper explores how budgetary incentives shape youth engagement with social media in both positive and negative dimensions.

A mixed-method approach was employed, combining primary data from 150 college students across five cities with secondary analysis of digital education schemes, cybersecurity funding, and platform regulation guidelines. Key variables include time spent online, content exposure, cyber awareness, and perceived platform utility in education and career.

Findings suggest that while budgetary support for digital literacy and online safety has enhanced youth awareness and responsible usage, gaps remain in mental health integration, misinformation resistance, and excessive screen time management. Recommendations include embedding youth-focused digital citizenship in national education policy and expanding public-private partnerships for ethical platform design.

Keywords: Youth, Social Networking Sites, Digital Economy, Union Budget 2024–25, Cybersecurity, Digital Literacy, Online Behavior, India

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) have redefined interpersonal interaction, self-expression, and knowledge acquisition among India's youth population. With over 600 million active internet users under age 30, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) are central to daily life, impacting decision-making, learning, and identity development.

The Government of India, under its Digital India vision, has expanded investments through Union Budget 2024–25 into digital infrastructure, cyber wellness, and educational digitization. These fiscal measures present an opportunity to guide youth engagement toward productivity, innovation, and psychological resilience.

This paper evaluates how budget-driven initiatives influence youth usage of SNS and their readiness to navigate digital platforms safely, constructively, and responsibly. It further explores the need for policy innovation to integrate ethical media use in formal curricula and public discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Networking Sites and Youth Behavior

SNS usage among youth has been associated with both empowerment and concern. While platforms offer tools for expression and learning (Kumar & Joshi, 2021), overuse is linked to anxiety, sleep disturbances, and distraction (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2020).

2.2 Impact of Digital Literacy Initiatives

Programs such as PMGDISHA and DIKSHA aim to improve digital competencies among youth. According to the Ministry of Education (2023), digital literacy correlates with more mindful and secure social media behavior.

2.3 Budgetary Allocation for Digital Wellness

Union Budget 2024–25 allocates ₹3,200 crore toward cybersecurity, digital learning, and ethical AI. However, Singh & Rath (2024) note that funds targeting youth-focused online behavior remain diffuse.

2.4 Cybersecurity and Mental Health Risks

The absence of adequate online safety frameworks has made youth vulnerable to trolling, addiction, misinformation, and cyberbullying. WHO (2022) recognizes SNS-induced stress as a growing mental health issue.

2.5 Role of Fiscal and Educational Policy

Policies integrating responsible digital citizenship within education curricula show promise. Studies in Scandinavian countries (Eriksen, 2020) reveal positive shifts in youth behavior where civic tech education is institutionalized.

2.6 Research Gaps

While several studies assess screen time and behavioral change, few analyze the effectiveness of budgetary provisions and national initiatives in shaping responsible SNS usage among Indian youth. This study addresses that gap through empirical and policy-oriented analysis.

3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Objectives:

1. To assess the impact of Union Budget 2024–25 on digital literacy and social media usage among Indian youth.
2. To examine correlations between government-funded digital initiatives and responsible online behavior.

3. To evaluate awareness of cybersecurity and mental wellness measures among youth social media users.
4. To identify gaps in policy translation affecting safe and productive social networking among students.

Hypotheses:

- **H₀₁:** Union Budget 2024–25 digital initiatives have no significant effect on youth social networking behavior.
- **H_{a1}:** Union Budget 2024–25 digital initiatives significantly influence youth social networking behavior.
- **H₀₂:** There is no correlation between digital literacy awareness and responsible social media usage.
- **H_{a2}:** There is a positive correlation between digital literacy awareness and responsible social media usage.
- **H₀₃:** Cybersecurity and wellness provisions have no impact on online safety perceptions among youth.
- **H_{a3}:** Cybersecurity and wellness provisions positively impact online safety perceptions among youth.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design: This study adopts a mixed-method research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The focus is on understanding how budgetary measures affect youth interactions with social networking platforms.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection: Primary data were collected from 150 college-going youth aged 18–25 years from five cities: Delhi, Bhopal, Pune, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling based on institutional affiliation and internet usage frequency.

4.3 Secondary Sources: Data regarding budgetary provisions, cybersecurity expenditure, and national digital schemes were obtained from the Union Budget 2024–25, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Electronics and IT, and cybersecurity foundations.

4.4 Tools and Instruments: A structured questionnaire was administered to assess:

- Average daily time spent on SNS
- Exposure to harmful vs. educational content
- Knowledge of digital safety tools and budget-linked schemes
- Perceived usefulness of SNS in career, learning, and social development

4.5 Statistical Techniques:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage)
- Pearson correlation between awareness of digital initiatives and responsible SNS behavior
- Chi-square test for associations between platform use and awareness of digital safety policies
- Thematic analysis of open-ended responses on budgetary expectations and digital challenges

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the empirical findings based on responses from 150 youth participants across five cities. It explores how time spent online, purpose, awareness, perceptions, and exposure to digital literacy and cybersecurity policies shape the quality of social media engagement among youth.

Table 1: Average Daily Time Spent on Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Duration per Day	Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	12	8%
1–3 hours	47	31.3%
3–5 hours	56	37.3%
More than 5 hours	35	23.3%

Interpretation: A majority (60.6%) of youth spend more than 3 hours daily on SNS, raising concerns about time management and digital well-being.

Table 2: Primary Purpose of SNS Usage

Purpose	Respondents (%)
Entertainment	36%
Education and Learning	26%
Social Connection	21%
Career Networking	10%
Other	7%

Interpretation: While entertainment remains the dominant use, over one-fourth of youth utilize SNS for educational purposes.

Table 3: Awareness of Government Digital Initiatives

Initiative	Aware (%)	Unaware (%)
Digital India Mission	68%	32%
Cyber Suraksha Campaign	52%	48%

National Digital Literacy	47%	53%
Digital Wellness in Curriculum	34%	66%

Interpretation: Awareness is high for flagship programs but lower for specific safety and wellness campaigns.

Table 4: Digital Citizenship Practices by Budget Awareness Level

Practice	High Awareness (%)	Low Awareness (%)
Uses privacy settings effectively	82	46
Verifies information before sharing	74	39
Avoids excessive screen time	69	41

Interpretation: Students with high budget and policy awareness adopt significantly more responsible SNS practices.

Table 5: Correlation – Digital Literacy Awareness and Responsible SNS Usage

Variable Pair	Pearson's r	p-value
Digital Literacy Awareness – Safe Use	0.62	0.0001

Interpretation: A strong positive correlation indicates that awareness significantly enhances safe and mindful SNS behavior.

Table 6: Chi-square Test – Platform Usage vs. Awareness of Safety Tools

Platform	Aware of Safety Tools (%)	χ^2 Value	p-value
Instagram	42%	13.24	0.002
WhatsApp	58%		
YouTube	33%		

Interpretation: Statistically significant differences exist in awareness levels across platforms, suggesting a gap in safety integration by platform type.

Table 7: Youth Perception of Budgetary Digital Impact

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Budget 2024–25 improves digital access for students	71%	20%	9%
Cyber wellness needs more policy attention	82%	12%	6%
SNS are useful for academic and career goals	64%	22%	14%

Interpretation: Respondents recognize the budget's value but call for enhanced focus on mental health and safe digital culture.

Table 8: Challenges Youth Face While Using SNS

Challenge	Respondents (%)
Exposure to misinformation	62%
Online harassment or trolling	43%
Digital fatigue/burnout	38%
Inadequate knowledge of safety tools	57%

Interpretation: More than half of youth report exposure to misleading content and insufficient safety knowledge.

Table 9: Sources of Information on Digital Safety

Source	Mentioned by Respondents (%)
School/College workshops	38%
Social media campaigns	33%
Government websites	18%
Peer networks/friends	11%

Interpretation: Educational institutions and social media are primary sources, with government portals underutilized.

Table 10: Suggestions from Youth on Enhancing SNS Engagement

Suggestion	Frequency (%)
Add SNS literacy in school/university curriculum	67%
Run targeted government campaigns on cyber wellness	59%
Partner with platforms for safer algorithm design	54%
Expand budget for campus digital awareness drives	48%

Interpretation: Youth advocate structured interventions and institutional integration of safe SNS engagement.

6. Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Test Applied	Calculated Value	p-value	Hypotheses Status
H ₀₁ : Budget 2024–25 digital initiatives have no significant effect on youth SNS behavior.	Correlation	r = 0.62	0.0001	Rejected
H _{a1} : Budget 2024–25 digital initiatives	Correlation	r = 0.62	0.0001	Accepted

significantly influence youth SNS behavior.				
H ₀₂ : No correlation between digital literacy awareness and responsible SNS usage.	Correlation	$r = 0.62$	0.0001	Rejected
H _{a2} : Positive correlation between digital literacy awareness and responsible SNS usage.	Correlation	$r = 0.62$	0.0001	Accepted
H ₀₃ : Cybersecurity and wellness provisions have no impact on online safety perceptions.	Chi-square Test	$\chi^2 = 13.24$	0.002	Rejected
H _{a3} : Cybersecurity and wellness provisions positively impact online safety perceptions.	Chi-square Test	$\chi^2 = 13.24$	0.002	Accepted

Interpretation: The results validate all three alternate hypotheses. Union Budget 2024–25's digital initiatives—particularly those focused on digital literacy and cybersecurity—have significantly influenced youth engagement with SNS. The correlation between awareness and responsible usage demonstrates the critical need for institutionalized digital education. Moreover, safety perceptions improved where government efforts were better communicated and implemented, signaling the value of targeted policy outreach.

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study highlights the pivotal role of fiscal policy in shaping youth behavior on social networking platforms. Budget 2024–25's emphasis on digital infrastructure, cyber wellness, and digital literacy has begun to influence young users' awareness, responsibility, and engagement patterns.

Key findings confirm a strong positive correlation between awareness of government digital schemes and responsible SNS usage. Youth who are better informed about safety tools and digital etiquette tend to practice more ethical, constructive, and safe online behaviors. At the same time, the study also uncovers gaps in awareness dissemination and mental health-oriented interventions.

Policy Recommendations:

- Mainstream Digital Citizenship Education:** Introduce structured modules on ethical online behavior, cyber hygiene, and fact-checking in school and college curricula.
- Amplify Budget Outreach Campaigns:** Ensure widespread, youth-centric communication about government digital safety and wellness programs.
- Expand Mental Health Integration:** Allocate funds specifically for mental health support related to social media use within educational institutions.
- Platform Partnerships:** Foster collaborations between government bodies and social media companies to co-design features that promote mindful usage and flag harmful content.
- Youth Digital Fellows Program:** Launch a flagship fellowship under Digital India that enables student ambassadors to promote cyber awareness in campuses.

These policy directions will ensure that the gains from digital expansion are equitably shared, safely navigated, and responsibly sustained by India's growing youth demographic.

8. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations:

1. The study sample is limited to urban college youth, excluding rural or working youth demographics.
2. Perceptions and behaviors are self-reported, which may involve recall bias or socially desirable responses.
3. The short time span after the 2024–25 budget limits the scope to early-stage policy effects.
4. The study does not examine the role of parental supervision or institutional SNS policies.
5. Mental health impact was not evaluated through clinical or psychometric scales.

Suggestions for Future Research:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to examine long-term digital behavior shifts post-budget implementation.
2. Expand research to rural regions and include non-student youth groups for more inclusive insights.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of specific schemes (e.g., Cyber Suraksha) through experimental or quasi-experimental methods.
4. Integrate psychological well-being assessments to correlate screen time with emotional resilience.
5. Investigate the role of AI-driven content moderation and algorithm design on youth digital engagement.

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