The "Digital Lifeline" Paradox among youth:
A study on Social Media platforms during COVID-19 in North-East India[4]

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Abstract:
From shopping to electronic communication, education, and business tools, social media is an essential part of daily life. Social media significantly impacts people's lives. Users may easily connect through blogs and other media channels. Journalists and their organizations have had to tread carefully ever since social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter became vital tools for reporting. People now use these websites regularly. Youth's mental health suffered as a result of the COVID-19 physical separation tactics. By using digital technology more frequently, young people worldwide have mitigated the negative impacts of social isolation. Numerous businesses, including manufacturing, services, and education, have been impacted by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Even though there is a likely approach to continue academic activities through online learning, both the procedure and the outcome could not be effective. The paper aims to critically analyze these trends of social media usage amongst the youth in North East India and to understand the influence of time spent on social networking sites on the mental health of youth in the selected states of North-East India. For this purpose, a systematic questionnaire was used to survey students from several northeastern Indian states. According to the study's findings, social media addiction among young people in northeastern states rose at the time of COVID-19, which is causing mental stress and sleep deprivation.

Key Words: Digitalization, Social media, Technology, Education, North East India

Introduction:
Our social interactions, communication, education, leisure, and work have all been completely transformed by the digital age we live in. Digitalization affects our well-being, autonomy, and essential pathways. When examining the many aspects of well-being, such as environmental mastery or positive relationships, it is important to take into account the digital environment and how young people communicate, learn, and participate on social networking sites. Digital capacities are essential to the well-being of the younger generations, who are referred to as "digital natives" due to their strong reliance on technology.

Mental wellness, described as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can contribute to his or her community," was inevitably impacted by the COVID-19outbreak and the containment measures connected to it (1). People grow their social networks, become more independent, and make critical choices to achieve long-term goals throughout adolescence, all of which have a big influence on mental health. (2) Both exposure to and experience of appropriate social and contextual cues, as well as the concurrent development of the brain's social and cognitive control areas, assist the development of these skills. (3) Teenagers' crucial brain functions, self-concept, and general mental health are greatly influenced by their social surroundings. Thus, the physical distancing strategies used during the COVID-19 epidemic may have had a detrimental effect on the development of young individuals. Numerous studies have shown that adolescence is a risk factor for many mental health problems, especially during epidemic outbreaks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social deprivation at a developmental stage characterized by a strong desire for peer connection likely exacerbates negative consequences on mental health.

The long-term consequences of global metrics on the mental health of teenagers were unknown. So far, several assessments have described the early impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on younger people. Similarly, allegations of an increase in overweight and BMI were also reported. Lockdowns and pandemics particularly impacted young people's mental health, leading to changes in sleep patterns and a general decline in psychological well-being, according to a narrative assessment of 15 publications (Luedtke, 2003). Most of the stresses were associated with financial, social, and academic problems. All things considered, these investigations demonstrated that youth were more susceptible to psychological distress, underscoring the necessity of specialized treatments and psychological assistance. By spending more time online, young people worldwide have been able to mitigate the detrimental effects of social isolation. Digital technologies, particularly social media, are now widely used. There are currently 8–38% more active users on apps like Pinterest, Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Similarly, exercise decreased and there was an increased consumption of fast food.

According to Sun (2022), who examined how 1,860 teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 used digital technology, participants spent more than four hours a day on recreational purposes and the same time on academic purposes. Interestingly, teenagers reported sending and receiving an average of over 100 SMS per day. It is hardly unexpected that smartphone dependency behaviors are becoming more common, particularly among young females.(Festa, 2003).It's possible that increased use of digital devices—particularly social media—improved social interaction and decreased feelings of loneliness. But social media platforms also spread an excessive amount of COVID-19-related content; in fact, one-third of COVID-19 updates were fraudulent, which exacerbates the already alarming problem.

These findings should be considered within the broader pre-pandemic context, where prior assessments have found that screen media use has a detrimental effect on youths' health through various processes, such as time lost for other activities and upward social comparison (O'Shea, 2003). This begs the issue of whether the pandemic's increased use of screen media may have made negative consequences worse by promoting cognitive distraction, raising social comparison and envy, and taking time away from health-promoting behaviors like exercise and sleep. But using screen media may have served as a buffer as well, for example, by fostering and preserving social ties during the COVID-19 epidemic. Individuals could have used social media to get away from ongoing worries and lift their spirits (Boyd, 2006). To the best of our knowledge, there isn't a thorough analysis of the connection between teens' use of digital media, such as social media and cellphones, and their mental well-being. By concentrating on adolescents in North East India, mental health, and the increase in hours spent on social media, could lead to addiction. The current study seeks to address this gap, which may also cause children to internalize issues. The following extra dangers are associated with using social media:

- exposure to offensive or dangerous content, such as violent, sexual, or drug-related images, or exposure to hazardous individuals
- inappropriate sharing of sensitive information; cyberbullying; exposure to numerous advertisements
- privacy issues, such as the gathering of youth data
- identity theft or hacking.
- meddling with one's personal life, hobbies, or sleep.

Challenges of Social Media Usage
Young people in Northeast India are more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use than most adults are aware. The main sources of danger include peer-to-peer inappropriate material, lack of awareness about internet privacy concerns, and external impacts from third-party advertising companies.

The main challenges that today's preadolescents and teens deal with include social risks, privacy concerns, concerns about technology usage, publishing inaccurate information about oneself or others, and divulging excessive amounts of personal information. These types of acts put their privacy in danger. When users visit various websites on the Internet, they may leave traces of the pages they have seen. This cumulative, real-time record of a person's internet actions is referred to as their "digital footprint". "The deterioration of young people's online personas and future reputations poses the biggest threat to their social media presence. The main challenges that today's preadolescents and teens deal with include social risks, privacy concerns and concerns about technology usage. When users visit various websites on the Internet, they may leave traces of the pages they have seen. (Outbreak in Italy, 2020) Privacy concerns often disseminate harmful photographs, videos, and remarks over the internet without realizing that this online

material cannot be deleted. Furthermore, careless Internet use may make it easier for marketers and scammers to target children and teens. (2006, Barnes). The deliberate dissemination of insulting, dehumanizing, or false material via digital media is known as cyberbullying.

Objective of the study: To examine how COVID-19 physical separation and increased social media use affect youth from Northeast India, especially in terms of mental health.

Aim: The paper aims to critically analyze these trends of social media usage amongst the youth and to comprehend social networking's effects on mental health amongst the youth in the selected states of North-East India duringCOVID-19.

Results and Discussion

The data were collected randomly from 800males and females of the age group 18- 25 years for this study. They were from various courses, enrolled in bachelor's and master's programs from various universities in North East India. The research utilizes an interview schedule to collect data. These instruments are chosen for their reliability and validity in measuring the variables of interest. Random stratified proportionate sampling was used. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. This analytical approach is deemed appropriate for the type of data and research questions posed.

Table - depicts the distribution of respondent responses on do they feel that excessive use of Social Networking sites can make them addicted

Response	Frequency	Percent
yes	632	79.0
Can't Say	117	14.6
No	51	6.4
Total	800	100.0

The data analysis shows that yes79% feel that excessive use of social networking sites makes them addicted, 14.6% can't say, and 6.4% say no that excessive use of Social networking sites can make them addicted. The findings depict that the lion's share of the population is of the view that excessive use of social networking sites can make them addicted.

Notably, social media platforms affected the emotional well-being of youth in Northeast India during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reported that one in five young people between the ages of 13 and 24 suffered from a mental condition. They were coping with obsessive-compulsive disorder, or social anxiety disorder, as well as mood disorders like bipolar disorder and

depression. Youth with mental health disorders, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, are greatly affected by these problems. High school dropout rates among youth with mental health problems were almost 50%, and suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth. Shafer (2017) narrated there was a positive correlation between higher use of social media and pressures related to money, education, and employment were taken into consideration.

This paper also tries to interlink the impact of social networking sites during COVID times, when there was no other option of interacting with family and friends. How social networking sites helped the youth to interact with friends and family during COVID times, but in turn addicted them to social media. It started impacting their well-being emotionally and mentally. It hasfar-reaching effects on the mental well-being of young people. It has led to irregular sleep.

Area of Study: The data were collected from eight states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, with over 220 tribes. A strong basis for embracing digital skills is provided by the fact that several states have literacy rates higher than the national average, notwithstanding economic challenges. Connectivity is hampered by tough terrain and infrastructural shortages. However, access to smartphones and the internet has improved thanks to Digital India initiatives. Social networking sites support the upkeep of ties between tribes and their diasporas. Additionally, they enable the sharing of indigenous customs and art. These forums host contentious political debates on development, rights, and autonomy. Young people frequently relocate in search of employment in school, which makes social networking sites (SNSs) more important for preserving friendships and familial ties across great distances. Youth used social networking sites (SNSs) to stay up to date on education, public health information, and social support during COVID-19, following global trends. They were vulnerable to false information and harm via the internet.

Conclusion

Studies have generally shown that the pandemic caused a rise in the usage of social media, including social media sites (suc Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat). It was observed that most of the youth spent more time online. This indicated an addiction to social media platforms. This addiction led to mental stress and lack of sleep. It also had detrimental effects on sleep, negative body image and self-esteem, cyberbullying, mental health, and digital distraction. The number of youths who have had serious depression has increased due to a rise in the number of hours spent online, the use of digital communication, and hence decrease in sleep length.

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