

Social Media Usage among Tribal Communities: A Study of Pir Panjal belt in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract- *The Pir Panjal region of Jammu and Kashmir encompasses a rich tapestry of tribal communities, notably the Gujjars, Bakarwals, and Paharis; however, this study specifically concentrates on the Gujar and Bakarwal populations. Historically, these communities have faced socio-geographical barriers, resulting in their marginalization. A widely held perception within these groups is that they are systematically excluded from socioeconomic advancements due to entrenched social hierarchies. In the contemporary digital age, the pervasive reach of social media and internet technologies has reshaped the social, economic, and cultural dynamics on a global scale. This study seeks to critically analyze the engagement of tribal communities in the Pir Panjal region with social media by examining the accessibility, functionality, availability, and usage patterns of these platforms.*

The researcher adopted a rigorous mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and subsequently administered surveys using structured questionnaires to ensure comprehensive data collection. Findings indicate that social media is primarily used for education, communication, and information. The study revealed that younger tribal members actively participate in sociopolitical discourse, cultural narrative sharing, and Peer networking on these platforms. Despite concerns over digital literacy, privacy, and misinformation, social media has empowered these communities by promoting activism, preserving cultural heritage, and expanding economic opportunities.

Keywords- *Social Media, Tribal Communities, Pir Panjal, Accessibility, Purpose, consumption, and Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

The Pir Panjal belt located in the western Himalayas spans across the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir. This mountainous region is renowned for its rugged terrain and challenging topography, playing a significant role in the area's geography, culture, and economy. The belt is home to a diverse population of

tribal communities, with the Gujjars and Bakarwals being the most prominent. These tribes are distinguished by their distinct nomadic cultural practices, which are primarily centered on pastoralism and agriculture.

In recent years, the advent of modern technologies and increased connectivity has begun to alter various aspects of their lives, including the way they communicate; access information and engage with the broader world. The advent of information communication technologies (ICT) the flow of information is growing exponentially and its influence in all domains of human life is dynamic in nature. It also alters the various aspects of human lives, including the way they communicate access information and engage with the broader world. Since the onset of the internet, its rapid proliferation has had a profound impact on people's lives worldwide. Today, the internet is utilized for a variety of purposes, including interactive communication, socializing, education, content creation and distribution, entertainment, and information sharing. Among these services, social networking stands out as the most prominent. Social networking sites have gained substantial popularity, establishing themselves as effective and compelling channels for worldwide interaction (Ali, 2016).

CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be defined as the fusion of digital media elements, including text, images, video, and audio, within a structured digital environment that enables users to engage with content for various purposes (Ocansey, Ametepe & Oduro, 2016). Any platform facilitating social interaction qualifies as a social media site, such as social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter; virtual worlds and

gaming platforms like Club Penguin, Second Life, and The Sims; video-sharing sites like YouTube; and blogs (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

The inception of social media has fundamentally transformed communication, providing unprecedented opportunities for social interaction, connection, and information sharing. The global user base continues to expand, reshaping engagement and interaction across various dimensions. Social media platforms encourage individuals of diverse ages, ethnicities, and cultures to engage in conversations and network within virtual communities. These platforms have emerged as crucial tools for communication, facilitating the sharing of information, shaping public opinion, and connecting individuals and communities.

Additionally, social media platforms offer spaces for users where they can create, share, and exchange ideas, while also benefiting from research opportunities within virtual networks. However, social media also presents significant risks, including issues of legitimacy, cyber bullying, privacy concerns, addiction, and negative impacts on both physical and mental health (Ahlqvist & Halonen, 2008).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has significantly transformed how people communicate, connect, and exchange information over the past few decades. Its origins trace back to the development of ARPANET in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which enabled researchers to share data between computers. By the 1980s, file and message exchanges became possible through Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). The 1990s saw the rise of instant messaging platforms like Internet Relay Chat (IRC).

The Six Degrees was the first popular social networking site that allowed users to create accounts and interact with friends, and it was launched in 1997. This paved the way for other social sites, such as Live Journal (1999) and Friendster (2002), which focused on fostering networks for social interaction and content sharing. The early 2000s saw the launch of several major social media platforms that are still in use, such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005),

LinkedIn (2003), MySpace (2003), and Twitter (2006). These social media platforms are the most popular and offer a wide range of features.

The modern era is aptly termed the "visual and mobile era." With the emergence of the internet, our lives have become deeply intertwined with digital devices such as smartphones, computers, and tablets. These technologies have transformed social interactions, shifting them from physical settings to virtual spaces. This shift is exemplified by the rise of visually-driven, mobile-first platforms like Instagram (2010), Pinterest (2010), Snapchat (2011), and TikTok (2016). These platforms, particularly favored by younger audiences, focus on image and video sharing, continually adding new features to enhance user engagement.

This study examines the patterns, purposes, and implications of social media usage among tribal communities in the Pir Panjal region of Jammu and Kashmir. Specifically, it explores how social media serves as a tool for community engagement, educational opportunities, and social connectivity, while also assessing its potential benefits and risks. The research focuses on rural populations, particularly the Bakarwals and Gujjars, within this region. The Pir Panjal area provides a distinctive context for understanding social media usage, due to its rich cultural heritage and geographically isolated nature.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The rapid surge in social media usage over recent years has sparked considerable academic interest, with a focus on understanding its adoption, relevance, and societal implications. These digital platforms have become central to modern communication, significantly influencing both individual interactions and community dynamics. Scholars have extensively explored how social media affects social behaviors, communication patterns, and overall well-being, particularly among youth.

The objective of this literature review is to synthesize prior research on social media adoption and its implications, highlighting key studies that contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon. Below, some of the significant research works in this field are outlined:

Gurusamy (2014) conducted a study exploring the influence of social networking sites on the interpersonal relationships of college students, employing a sociological lens to understand the implications. The research revealed that the use of social media significantly impacts students' interactions with family, friends, and educators. Concretely, the rise of social networking platforms has facilitated enhanced communication among students and their social circles, including friends and family members.

The study delved into patterns of social media use, motivations for engagement, time allocation, and platform preferences among college students. It highlighted that, in contemporary times, young people have become so heavily reliant on social media that they struggle to envision personal or academic growth without it. It further emphasized that this excessive dependence fosters addiction, leading to potential negative consequences on their social and cognitive development.

Social media use has become the most common activity among children and adolescents, offering them platforms for entertainment and communication that have grown exponentially in recent years. As social media engagement increases, it is essential for parents to understand the dynamics of these platforms to create a safe environment for their children. This understanding allows parents to shield their children from online risks such as cyberbullying, online predators, and exposure to inappropriate content, ensuring their safety and well-being in the digital age.

Pediatricians are uniquely positioned to assist families in navigating these challenges. They can guide parents in encouraging healthy social media use, monitoring for potential issues like cyberbullying, social media-induced depression, sexting, and other digital dangers. By fostering awareness and promoting proactive monitoring, pediatricians can play a key role in helping families protect children from the risks associated with online engagement (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Social media has become an integral part of modern life, influencing various aspects such as shopping, communication, education, and business. It plays a

crucial role in transforming lifestyles by providing a platform for individuals to connect and engage. Social media encompasses social networking sites, blogs, and other tools that allow users to easily communicate, share information, and collaborate. It is commonly defined as a collection of cost-effective, widely accessible electronic tools that enable individuals to publish and access information, work together on common goals, and foster relationships (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016).

The literature review indicates that most studies on social networking sites focus on their effects on individuals, particularly youth, examining impacts on relationships, mental health, and academic performance. This study shifts the focus by exploring the socio-digital practices of tribal communities in the Pir Panjal region of district Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir. It investigates their unique social media habits, content creation, connectivity, and use of online resources. The aim is to understand how social media influences their lives and how it can be harnessed for social, cultural, and economic development.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The specific objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

- To analyze the patterns and frequency of social media usage within Gujjars and Bakarwals
- To explore the role of social media in fostering social interactions and contributing to the emotional well-being of Gujjars and Bakarwals.
- To investigate the potential cyber threats and risks associated with social media usage among tribal peoples.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research methodology outlines the methods for examining social media usage among the Gujjars and Bakarwals in Rajouri district, Jammu and Kashmir. A mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) will be employed. Data will be collected through structured questionnaires and interview schedules. The study will be descriptive, analytical, and empirical, focusing on the tribal communities (Gujjars and

Bakarwals) in the Pir Panjal belt of Rajouri district, Jammu and Kashmir.

The research methodology outlines the processes and techniques used to investigate social media usage among tribals in the Pir Panjal belt of district Rajouri of Jammu and Kashmir. This includes research design, data collection method, data analysis.

The research will focus on the Rajouri district in the Pir Panjal region of Jammu and Kashmir, selected for its significant Gujjar and Bakarwal populations. These communities provide a rich context for examining social media usage among tribal groups.

- **Sampling:** A purposive and random sample of 100 individuals aged 15-40 years above will be selected, as this age group predominantly consists of early adopters and heavy users of social media. The sample will be representative of various socioeconomic backgrounds within the tribal communities, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of social media's impact.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The rapid growth of social media usage, particularly after COVID-19, has prompted academic interest in its impact on users, focusing on daily reliance, collaborative efforts, and digital media literacy. In this context, examining the adoption of social media among tribal communities is essential. This study aims to assess the inclusivity of these communities in the digital media landscape, considering factors like population size and geographic coverage. The findings will identify gaps in technological interventions and provide recommendations to improve digital engagement in tribal areas.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the data collected from indigenous communities in the Pir Panjal region of district Rajouri, focusing on social media usage trends, goals, and its effects. By examining the data, the findings draw a clear picture of how these communities (Gujjars and Bakarwals) engage with social media platforms. The analysis highlights both the opportunities and challenges that social media presents, offering insights into its role in shaping cultural, social, and economic interactions within the region.

1: Demographics variation:

Table 1.1: Age of Respondents

Age Groups	Age (in years)	Number of active User (respondents)	Percentage
Young Adults	18-25 yrs	63	63%
Adults	26-40 yrs	37	37%

Table 1.2: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Number of respondents	Percentage
Male	69	69%
Female	31	31%

Table 1.3: Educational Level

Educational Level	Respondents	Percentage
Primary Education	57	57%
Secondary Education	24	24%
Higher Education	19	19%

Table 1.4: Occupation

The demographic data collected for this study encompassed age, gender, income, occupation, and educational attainment. These variables were selected to provide a holistic understanding of the factors influencing social media usage among tribal communities. The data revealed that the majority of the sample population consisted of young individuals,

Occupation	No. of respondents	Percentage
Agriculture	52	52%
Labor	17	17%
Govt. service	15	15%
Unemployed	16	16%

particularly those aged 18 to 25 years, who represented 63% of the active internet users. In contrast, individuals in the 26 to 40-year age group accounted for only 37% of digital platform users. Regarding educational attainment, 19% of indigenous participants had pursued higher education, 24% had completed secondary education, and 57% had completed only primary school.

In terms of occupation, 52% of the tribal population relies on agriculture, making it the dominant occupation, followed by labor work, which accounts for 17%. Government services have minimal representation. Our sample showed a higher proportion of young adults and males, which could indicate a greater inclination toward social media usage, as younger generations tend to be more tech-savvy. The gender imbalance may also influence the

types of social media platforms used and the content consumed. Additionally, education levels likely play a role in shaping the extent and nature of social media engagement, with higher education potentially leading to more diverse uses of digital platforms. These findings highlight the diverse educational backgrounds and age distributions that may impact social media engagement within this demographic.

2: Internet Access and Infrastructure Development:

Internet access	Respondents	Percentage
Respondent who access internet	63	63%
Respondents who do not access internet	37	37%
Total	100	100%

Table 2: Internet Access by Tribals

Table 2 highlights the internet accessibility among the tribal communities in the Pir Panjal belt, based on a sample of 100 respondents. Of these, 63 respondents reported having access to the internet, while 37 respondents did not. The findings indicate that although internet connectivity has reached the region, significant disparities in access persist. Many areas continue to experience unreliable and slow internet speeds, and the high cost of digital devices and data plans presents a financial barrier for many households. These infrastructural challenges underscore the digital divide within the region. Despite the availability of internet connectivity, the inconsistent quality and affordability of services hinder the full potential of digital engagement for many community members. Addressing these issues through targeted infrastructure improvements and subsidized data plans could significantly enhance digital inclusion in the region.

3: Availability and Accessibility of social media platforms:

Social media platforms available	No. of respondents accesses the platforms	Percentage
Facebook	33	33%
YouTube	18	18%
Instagram	12	12%
Twitter (now X)	3	3%
Whats App	30	30%
Others platforms	4	4%

Table 3: Social Media platforms Available

Social media usage is notably more prevalent among younger members of the community, with platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram being the most frequently accessed. Usage patterns reveal that

social media is predominantly accessed via smartphones, with individuals engaging on a spectrum ranging from daily to occasional use. The demographic concentration of younger users highlights a clear generational divide in terms of digital literacy and access. Younger individuals tend to be more adept at navigating social media, which may contribute to an emerging information and opportunity gap, both within families and the wider community. To address this divide, targeted initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy among older adults could play a crucial role in fostering more equitable access to digital opportunities.

4: Purposes of Usage of Social Media:

Purpose of usage	Number of respondents	Percentage
Communication	47	47%
Entertainment	19	19%
Information and News	18	18%
Education and Learning	16	16%

Social media plays a multifaceted role within the community, serving as a platform for communication, education, entertainment, and, to a lesser extent, economic activities like promoting local businesses. Increasingly, social media is also being utilized for political engagement and activism, reflecting a broader societal shift toward digital platforms as tools for civic participation. While communication and entertainment remain the primary drivers of social media use, the platforms hold significant untapped potential for educational and economic advancement.

The ability to access educational resources and engage in online learning provides new opportunities for knowledge dissemination, while social media's role in promoting local businesses is an emerging economic driver. However, to fully harness these benefits, there is a need to support and encourage entrepreneurial activities, particularly by offering training on how to effectively use social media for business promotion. Such initiatives can help individuals tap into the economic potential of social media, fostering local business growth, creating new economic opportunities, and empowering individuals to engage more meaningfully in the digital economy.

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Emotional connection, in the context of social media, refers to the ability of individuals to use digital platforms not only to express and manage their emotions but also to build and sustain relationships grounded in emotional resonance. For tribal communities, emotional connection through social media has become a significant aspect of personal and collective identity. These communities often utilize social media to share personal experiences, emotional milestones, and significant life events—such as celebrations, hardships, and rituals—thereby creating a virtual space for emotional expression.

The use of emoticons, emojis, and hashtags serves as a form of emotional shorthand, allowing individuals to convey complex feelings quickly and visually. These tools enable a richer, more nuanced interaction than traditional text-based communication alone. Beyond simple expression, the emotional connection facilitated by social media in these communities also plays a pivotal role in reinforcing cultural and social bonds. Through shared narratives and collective emotional experiences, individuals strengthen their sense of belonging to the larger community, even when physically distant.

Furthermore, emotional connection on social media contributes to emotional development by promoting empathy and understanding. Through the exchange of emotional experiences, individuals enhance their emotional intelligence—learning to recognize and manage their emotions while developing a deeper sensitivity to the emotions of others. This process is crucial in fostering positive interpersonal relationships and social cohesion within the communities. In the digital age, emotional connection thus becomes not only a tool for personal expression but also a key element in maintaining and enhancing tribal cultural identity and social networks, especially in regions where physical isolation may limit face-to-face interaction.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Social media has a dual impact on the lives of tribal communities, offering both positive opportunities and significant challenges. On the positive side, social media facilitates improved communication, enabling tribal individuals to stay connected with family and friends, especially those living in distant areas. This

ease of communication strengthens personal relationships and reduces the isolation often experienced in remote regions. Additionally, social media serves as a vital tool for accessing both local and global news, keeping tribal individuals informed and up to date on a variety of topics. Platforms like YouTube also offer educational resources, with numerous channels dedicated to preparing individuals for various competitive and standard exams, enhancing learning opportunities for the tribal population.

However, social media also presents several challenges. Low digital literacy remains a significant barrier, as many tribal community members lack the necessary skills to navigate online spaces effectively. Privacy and security concerns further complicate the digital experience, with many individuals unaware of how to safeguard their personal information. Cyber bullying and the spread of misinformation are also growing concerns, posing risks to mental health and community cohesion.

To address these issues, it is crucial to implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that not only teach technical skills but also emphasize online safety, privacy protection, and responsible use of digital platforms. Community-based workshops, in partnership with NGOs and local organizations, could be highly effective in raising awareness and building the necessary skills for safe and informed internet usage. These initiatives would ensure that tribal communities can fully benefit from social media while mitigating its risks.

CONCLUSIONS

Social media has emerged as a critical tool for tribal communities in the Pir Panjal belt, enabling the articulation of collective goals, the fostering of solidarity, and the organization of grassroots actions. This study reveals that platforms like Facebook have become particularly influential, with tribal members using them to support civic journalism, advocate for freedom of speech, and engage more actively in political and civic matters. The rise in social media usage among these communities is especially pronounced among younger individuals and those with access to the internet, reflecting a growing digital presence. While WhatsApp and Facebook dominate as primary communication tools, platforms like YouTube

and Instagram are increasingly popular for entertainment, information dissemination, and the sharing of cultural narratives.

Despite its positive impact on communication and cultural exchange, social media has also brought to light several challenges. These include the persistent digital divide, where a significant portion of the population still lacks reliable internet access, hindering the full benefits of social media. Additionally, misinformation remains a pervasive issue, with certain platforms amplifying misleading narratives or unverified content. The study also points to the ethical concerns surrounding the type of content shared on social media, particularly videos that may feature explicit material without any regard for the ethical implications of such posts. These factors not only affect the credibility of the information shared but also raise concerns about the potential harm caused by inappropriate or sensational content.

In conclusion, while social media has facilitated greater communication and cultural connectivity among the tribal populations of the Pir Panjal belt, it also highlights the urgent need for improved digital literacy programs and more responsible media consumption. Ensuring ethical content sharing and addressing the challenges posed by misinformation and the digital divide should be key priorities for future initiatives aimed at enhancing the role of social media in these communities.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Improve digital literacy and Education:** Implement targeted digital literacy programs to equip tribal communities, especially youth, with the skills needed to navigate social media effectively. These programs should cover internet safety, identifying misinformation, and using platforms for constructive purposes like civic engagement, education, and culture preservation.
- **Expand Internet Infrastructure and Accessibility:** Given the challenges posed by the digital divide, efforts should be made to enhance internet connectivity in remote and underserved areas of the Pir Panjal belt. Providing affordable internet access, through both government initiatives and

private partnerships, would empower more individuals to participate in the digital landscape.

- **Promote Culturally Relevant and Ethical Content:** Encourage the creation and sharing of content that reflects the values, traditions, and issues specific to the tribal communities of the Pir Panjal region. Local leaders, in collaboration with social media platforms, should develop community guidelines to ensure that content shared on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram adheres to ethical standards and avoids explicit or harmful material.
- **Enhance Collaboration Between Social Media Platforms and Local Institutions:** Foster partnerships between social media platforms, local media, and community organizations to ensure that tribal populations receive accurate, timely, and culturally sensitive information. Collaborative efforts can help amplify local voices and improve the quality of information circulating within the communities.
- **Support Youth Leadership and Empowerment:** Given the high engagement of youth on social media, initiatives should focus on empowering young people as digital leaders. Encouraging youth-led social media campaigns and providing mentorship opportunities can cultivate a new generation of community advocates who can use social media to promote positive change and social cohesion.

These recommendations aim to address the challenges and leverage the opportunities presented by social media in the Pir Panjal belt. By focusing on digital literacy, ethical content, and greater connectivity, these efforts can ensure social media serves as a positive tool for tribal communities in Jammu and Kashmir.

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