

Scrolling Toward Success? How Social Media Shapes Career Aspirations and Selection Among Indian Youth

Santhosh Kumar Shrinivas¹, Verina Merlin Tauro²

¹Business and Management, Gulf College, Muscat, Oman

²Lecturer, St. Aloysious PU college, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.130200183>

Received: 04 March 2026; Accepted: 06 March 2026; Published: 20 March 2026

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of internet access and smartphone penetration has transformed the career decision-making landscape of youth, particularly in digitally dynamic contexts such as India. This conceptual paper develops an integrated theoretical framework to explain how social media engagement influences career selection intentions among Indian youth. Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Capital Theory, the study argues that social media does not directly determine career choices but reshapes the cognitive, emotional, and evaluative processes underlying them. Social media functions as a contemporary learning environment where exposure to professional narratives, influencer trajectories, and peer achievements influences career self-efficacy, work values, and outcome expectations. Simultaneously, upward social comparison processes may intensify aspirations while also generating employment anxiety and perceived competition. The framework proposes that these psychological mechanisms mediate the relationship between social media engagement and career selection intentions, while digital literacy, socio-economic background, and institutional guidance moderate the strength and direction of these effects. By extending traditional career development theory into algorithmically mediated environments and contextualising the analysis within India's socio-economic landscape, the paper offers a nuanced and theory-driven explanation of youth career formation in the digital age and provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy interventions.

Keywords

Social Media Engagement; Career Selection; Indian Youth; Social Cognitive Career Theory; Social Comparison; Digital Capital; Career Self-Efficacy; Work Values; Digital Literacy; Employment Anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the expansion of internet access and smartphone penetration has fundamentally transformed the social, educational, and occupational landscapes of young people worldwide. Social media platforms including Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn have become integral to daily communication, identity construction, information seeking, and peer interaction. In India, where the youth (aged 15–29) constitute a significant demographic segment, the rapid digitalisation of society has amplified the role of social media in shaping aspirations, perceptions, and the life decisions. Among these decisions, career selection represents one of the most critical developmental milestones. Social media may be defined as interactive digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and exchange content within networked communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Unlike traditional media, social media operates through algorithmic personalisation, participatory engagement, and peer-generated content. These structural features make it not only an information source but also a powerful socialisation environment. Research has consistently shown that media exposure influences attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions through mechanisms such as observational learning and social comparison (Bandura, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For adolescents and emerging adults—who are actively forming professional identities—such exposure may significantly shape career perceptions.

Career selection is traditionally understood as a process influenced by individual interests, self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and environmental supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994). Social Cognitive Career

Theory (SCCT) posits that individuals develop career interests based on learning experiences that shape self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which in turn influence goals and actions (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013). In contemporary digital contexts, social media provides new forms of learning experiences: exposure to career role models, entrepreneurial narratives, remote work lifestyles, and digital professions. These experiences may reshape how youth conceptualise occupational success and feasibility. India presents a unique and compelling context for examining this phenomenon. With one of the largest youth populations globally and rapidly increasing internet penetration, India has witnessed a dramatic rise in social media usage across urban and semi-urban regions. Reports indicate that Indian youth spend several hours daily engaging with digital platforms, often using them for both social and informational purposes (Prakash, 2025). This sustained engagement coincides with increasing diversification of career pathways, including digital marketing, content creation, e-commerce entrepreneurship, coding, fintech, and influencer economies. As a result, social media may function as both an informational infrastructure and an aspirational ecosystem.

Emerging research suggests that social media contributes to career development in multiple ways. First, it facilitates access to career information and networking opportunities, particularly through platforms such as LinkedIn and professional communities (Nikolaou, 2014). Second, it enables exposure to peer success stories and professional role models, which may enhance career self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Third, social media allows young people to experiment with identity presentation and professional branding, processes closely linked to career identity formation (Ibarra, 1999). However, scholars have also identified potential distortions, including unrealistic portrayals of professional success, heightened social comparison, and algorithmic amplification of certain career narratives (Appel et al., 2016; Chae, 2018). The mechanism of social comparison is particularly relevant. Social media environments often emphasise curated achievements and lifestyle representations. According to social comparison theory, individuals evaluate their own abilities and aspirations in relation to others (Festinger, 1954). Research indicates that upward social comparison on social networking sites can influence career aspirations and perceived self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014). In the Indian context—where academic competition and employment pressures are already intense—such comparison processes may intensify career-related anxieties while simultaneously broadening aspirational horizons.

Moreover, the digital environment introduces new forms of “digital capital,” defined as the competencies and network resources derived from online engagement (Ragnedda, 2018). Youth who effectively leverage social media for learning, networking, and skill development may gain advantages in career exploration and employment access. Conversely, digital inequalities in access and literacy may reproduce or deepen socio-economic disparities. Thus, social media’s impact on career selection cannot be viewed as uniformly positive or negative; it must be examined as a complex interaction between individual agency, platform structures, and socio-economic context. While international scholarship has examined social media’s influence on youth behavior, mental health, and identity development (Boyd, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), there remains limited conceptual integration focusing specifically on career selection processes within emerging economies such as India. Existing studies often treat career choice as a secondary outcome rather than a primary analytical focus. Furthermore, the interplay between traditional influences (family expectations, educational institutions, socio-cultural norms) and digital influences (online communities, influencers, algorithmic content feeds) has not been sufficiently theorised.

Given these gaps, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive conceptual framework that synthesises media theory, career development theory, and digital sociology to understand how social media shapes career selection among Indian youth. Such a framework must consider cognitive mechanisms (self-efficacy, outcome expectations), social mechanisms (peer influence, role modeling, comparison), and structural mechanisms (platform algorithms, digital access, labor market narratives).

Accordingly, the objectives of this conceptual paper are threefold:

1. To examine the theoretical mechanisms through which social media influences career selection among Indian youth.
2. To integrate existing empirical findings from media studies and vocational psychology into a coherent conceptual framework.

3. To identify implications for educators, policymakers, career counselors, and researchers in designing informed digital career guidance interventions.

By situating social media within established career development theories and contextualising the discussion within India's socio-economic landscape, this paper aims to contribute a nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of how digital ecosystems shape the career trajectories of contemporary youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The widespread adoption of social media in daily life has led researchers from disciplines such as psychology, education, sociology, and communication to increasingly investigate its influence on young people's decision-making, particularly in relation to career choices (Sardorbekovna, 2025). This section integrates major insights from recent empirical and conceptual studies to position the current research within the wider academic literature.

1.1. Social Media as a Source of Career Information and Aspirations

Several studies highlight social media platforms as significant sources of career-related information and exposure for young people. Research indicates that platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube provide access to diverse occupational narratives, networking possibilities, and inspirational content that expand youths' perceived career horizons beyond traditional paths (Priya & Vasikar, 2023). This research in Chennai found that social networking sites significantly influence career aspirations by facilitating exposure to varied professions, peer-generated success stories, and digital skill communities, although this exposure is coupled with the risk of unrealistic expectations and diminished focus on foundational skill development (Priya & Vasikar, 2023).

Similarly, studies using qualitative focus group methods have explored how adolescents in European contexts encounter career-related content online. Findings suggest that adolescents are aware of the limitations and promotional nature of social media content on careers, and while many do not actively rely on it for definitive career decisions, social media still shapes their awareness of possibilities and professional identities through observational learning processes (Gössling et al., 2025).

1.2. Influence Pathways: Cognitive and Social Mechanisms

The mechanisms through which social media influences career selection extend beyond content exposure to include cognitive and social processes such as upward social comparison, development of work values, and self-efficacy. Research among Chinese youth, for example, demonstrates that social media use is associated with employment anxiety through processes of upward social comparison and online social support, which influence self-esteem and career confidence (Jin et al., 2024). Studies in organisational and career psychology further emphasise the mediating role of internal psychological constructs. A recent quantitative investigation among college students in China found that social media use was positively associated with more flexible and diverse job choices, mediated by work values and self-efficacy. Here, exposure to career content and professional networks on social platforms helped students form stronger personal work values and development-oriented self-beliefs, which, in turn, influenced their career decisions (Li et al., 2025).

These mediating processes are conceptually consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which positions self-efficacy and outcome expectations as central determinants of career interests and choices. Social media thus emerges both as an informational environment and as a space for vicarious learning, where youth form cognitive evaluations of career options based on observed success models and peer feedback.

1.3. Educational and Career Guidance Functions

A growing body of work asserts that social media can play an affirmative role in formal and informal career guidance when integrated thoughtfully into educational practices. Research on digital career guidance suggests that social media, supported by structured strategies and professional interventions, can enhance traditional career counselling by widening access to job market information, professional networks, and peer support

communities (Tkachuk, 2025). Educational institutions in India and elsewhere are examining how to harness social media's informational reach while mitigating misinformation and distraction. For example, career counsellors increasingly incorporate digital literacy into their practices to help students critically evaluate online career content and align it with personal interests and market realities — a trend corroborated by qualitative accounts of school counselling evolution in Indian urban centres. Such approaches emphasise that social media should complement, not replace, personalised guidance and multi-stakeholder support in career decision-making.

1.4.Social Influence and Peer Dynamics

Social influence operates through both content and social networks. In Ghana, for instance, research exploring career aspirations among senior high school students quantitatively confirmed that both peers and social media significantly influence career choice and aspirations, recommending the integration of structured digital content into guidance programmes to enhance informed decision-making (Adzovie et al.,2025). While existing research does not always directly address career choice, the wider body of literature on the socialising role of social media highlights how interactions with peers, the development of norms, and participation in digital cultures influence young people's understanding of success and professional expectations. These influences are important for career decision-making models, as they shape the social environments within which young individuals form and position their aspirations (Nakamura et al., 2020).

1.5.Contextual Limitations and Potential Downsides

Despite its benefits, research also identifies potential downsides of social media influence. Limited or inaccurate portrayals of careers on digital platforms may contribute to unrealistic expectations, contributing to anxiety and decision ambivalence. This concern aligns with work showing that heightened social media use correlates with employment anxiety among youth due to upward comparisons that inflate perceived competition and idealise career success (Jin et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies suggest that social media's role in career choice may vary considerably across cultural and socio-economic contexts, necessitating nuanced investigation rather than universal generalisations.

CONCEPTUAL METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research design focused on theory development through systematic literature integration rather than primary data collection. The objective is to construct a coherent framework explaining how social media influences career selection among Indian youth. Peer-reviewed articles were selected from highly dependable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. To ensure contemporary relevance, the review primarily includes studies published from 2016 onwards, while retaining a limited number of foundational theoretical works (e.g., Social Cognitive Career Theory and social comparison theory) necessary for conceptual grounding.

The methodology involved three key stages:

1. Theoretical Mapping – Identification of core frameworks relevant to the study (career development theory, media effects theory, and digital sociology).
2. Thematic Literature Synthesis – Systematic organisation of recent empirical findings into cognitive, social, and structural influence pathways.
3. Conceptual Integration and Proposition Development – Clear definition of constructs (e.g., social media exposure, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, digital capital, career intentions) and development of a multi-level conceptual framework with theoretically grounded propositions.

The approach emphasises logical consistency, interdisciplinary integration, contextual relevance to India, and the generation of testable propositions for future empirical research.

1.6. Theoretical Foundation

This conceptual framework integrates three major theoretical perspectives:

1. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013)
2. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; updated digital applications post-2018)
3. Digital Capital Theory (Ragnedda, 2018; 2020 extensions)

Together, these frameworks explain how social media influences youth career selection through cognitive, social, and structural pathways.

3.2. Core Constructs of the Framework

A. Independent Variable

Social Media Engagement (SME) Defined as the intensity, frequency, and purpose of youth interaction with social media platforms for informational, networking, and aspirational content.

Dimensions include:

- Career-related content exposure
- Influencer and role model consumption
- Peer interaction and feedback
- Algorithm-driven content discovery

Importantly, engagement is not treated as mere screen time, but as meaningful career-oriented interaction.

B. Mediating Mechanisms

The framework proposes three primary mediators:

1. Career Self-Efficacy

(From SCCT)

Exposure to career narratives and digital role models enhances or diminishes beliefs about one's ability to succeed in specific professions.

2. Work Values and Outcome Expectations

Youth internalise perceptions of income, prestige, flexibility, creativity, and lifestyle from social media portrayals.

3. Social Comparison Orientation

Upward comparisons with peers and influencers shape aspiration intensity, perceived competition, and confidence levels.

C. Moderating Variables

The impact of social media is not uniform. It is moderated by:

1. Digital Literacy

- Ability to critically evaluate online content.
- Distinguish realistic career pathways from curated portrayals.

2. Socio-Economic Background

- Access to digital capital
- Parental education
- Urban vs rural exposure

3. Parental and Institutional Guidance

- Strength of offline mentoring
- Career counselling exposure

D. Dependent Variable

Career Selection Intentions

Defined as:

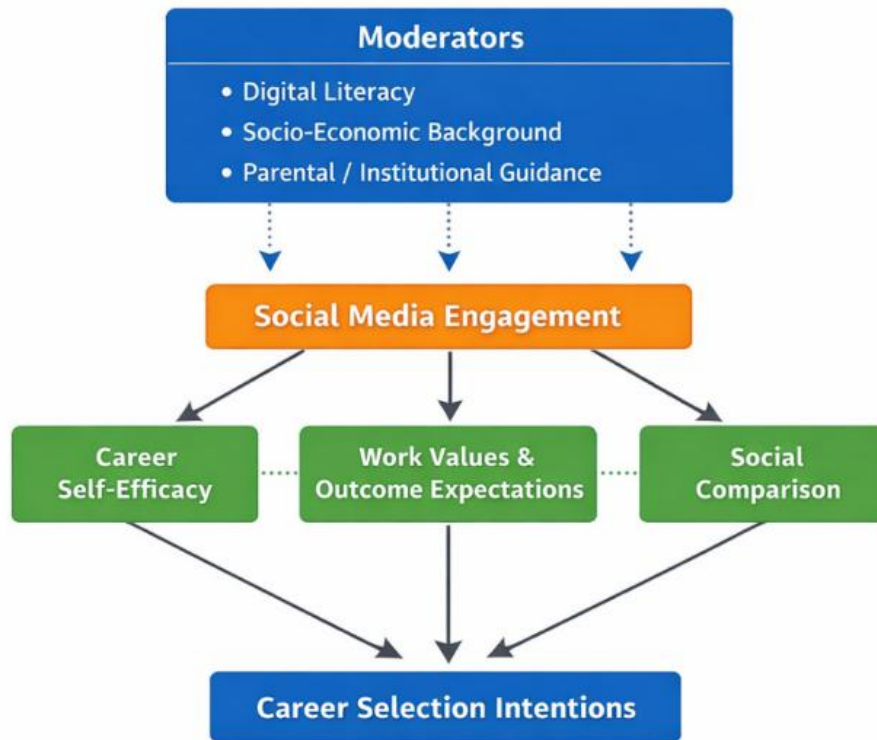
- Preferred career choice
- Strength of commitment
- Exploration behavior
- Decision confidence

1.7. Proposed Conceptual Model

The framework posits that:

1. Social media engagement increases exposure to diverse career narratives.
2. This exposure influences career self-efficacy, work values, and outcome expectations.
3. Social comparison processes shape aspiration intensity and perceived attainability.
4. These mediating psychological mechanisms influence career selection intentions.
5. Digital literacy and socio-economic factors moderate the strength and direction of these relationships.

In short: social media does not directly determine career choice. It reshapes how youth *perceive, evaluate, and internalise* career possibilities.



3.2.1. Conceptual Framework Explanation

The proposed conceptual framework seeks to explain how social media engagement shapes career selection intentions among youth in India by integrating insights from Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Capital Theory. Rather than assuming that social media directly determines career choices, the framework conceptualises its influence as operating through psychological and social mechanisms embedded within broader structural contexts. In doing so, it recognises career decision-making as a developmental process increasingly situated within digitally mediated environments.

Social Cognitive Career Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for understanding this relationship. According to SCCT, career interests and choices emerge from the interaction between self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and learning experiences (Lent & Brown, 2013). Traditionally, such learning experiences occurred through family guidance, educational institutions, internships, and peer interactions. However, in the contemporary digital era, social media has become a parallel learning space where young people encounter career-related narratives, professional identities, and models of success. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn expose youth to curated portrayals of entrepreneurship, corporate achievement, creative freelancing, and global mobility. These exposures function as vicarious learning experiences that may strengthen or weaken beliefs about personal capability. Empirical research supports this dynamic: Li et al. (2025) demonstrate that social media use positively influences job choice flexibility through enhanced self-efficacy and internalised work values, while Jin et al. (2024) show that online exposure can also undermine self-esteem through upward comparison processes, thereby increasing employment anxiety. Within the Indian context—characterised by intense academic competition and strong socio-economic mobility aspirations—such digital learning experiences can significantly shape perceived attainability of career pathways.

Closely related to self-efficacy are outcome expectations and work values, which SCCT identifies as crucial determinants of career intentions. Social media environments often emphasise visible indicators of professional success, including financial independence, lifestyle flexibility, social recognition, and rapid achievement. Repeated exposure to such narratives may reshape how youth evaluate desirable career outcomes. Ma et al. (2025) argue that social media pressure influences career exploration behaviours by altering perceptions of opportunity and competition, while Li et al. (2025) highlight the mediating role of work values in translating social media engagement into job choice decisions. In India, where traditional professional tracks such as engineering, medicine, and government service coexist with emerging digital professions, these evolving work

values are particularly salient. Social media not only introduces new occupational categories but also redefines what constitutes success, thereby influencing the criteria young people use when selecting careers.

Social Comparison Theory further deepens the explanatory power of the framework by highlighting the emotional and evaluative dimensions of digital engagement. Online platforms create continuous opportunities for upward comparison, as users are routinely exposed to peers' academic achievements, entrepreneurial milestones, and international placements. Jin et al. (2024) empirically demonstrate that such upward comparison processes contribute to employment anxiety and shifts in self-perception among youth. In the Indian setting, where societal emphasis on achievement is pronounced, social comparison may simultaneously intensify ambition and heighten self-doubt. This dual effect suggests that social media can function both as a motivational catalyst and as a source of psychological strain, depending on how comparisons are internalised.

While these mediating processes explain how social media engagement translates into career intentions, the framework also recognises that such effects are not uniform. Drawing on Digital Capital Theory, the model posits that digital literacy significantly moderates the influence of social media exposure (Ragnedda, 2018). Youth with higher digital competencies are better equipped to critically evaluate online content, distinguish between aspirational marketing and realistic career pathways, and cross-verify information with labour market data. Conversely, limited digital literacy may increase susceptibility to over-idealised portrayals and impulsive career shifts. Thus, digital capital determines whether social media functions as an empowering informational resource or a source of distorted expectations. Socio-economic background and institutional support further shape the relationship between digital exposure and career outcomes. Access to financial resources, quality education, mentoring networks, and parental guidance influences the extent to which online inspiration can be translated into actionable opportunities. Youth from advantaged backgrounds may be better positioned to capitalise on digital insights, whereas those from constrained environments may experience aspirational inflation without structural support. Consequently, social media's impact must be understood as embedded within India's broader socio-economic diversity.

Taken together, the framework proposes that social media engagement influences career selection intentions indirectly through its effects on career self-efficacy, work values, outcome expectations, and social comparison processes, while digital literacy and socio-economic conditions moderate these pathways. This integrative model extends traditional career development theory into digital contexts and offers a nuanced understanding of how contemporary youth navigate career decision-making within algorithmically curated environments. By situating social media within established theoretical traditions and contextualising its influence within India's developmental landscape, the framework provides a coherent foundation for future empirical investigation and policy-oriented interventions.

2. Development of Theoretical Propositions

The conceptual framework developed in this study posits that social media engagement influences career selection intentions among Indian youth through a series of psychological and social mechanisms, conditioned by structural moderators. Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Capital Theory, this section articulates formal theoretical propositions that emerge from the integrated review of literature. Social Cognitive Career Theory provides the primary explanatory foundation. SCCT argues that career interests and choices are shaped by self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations formed through learning experiences (Lent & Brown, 2013). In contemporary digital environments, social media platforms function as significant sources of such learning experiences. Through exposure to professional narratives, peer achievements, influencer career trajectories, and entrepreneurial storytelling, youth encounter vicarious models that inform their understanding of occupational possibilities. Recent empirical evidence supports this mechanism. Li et al. (2025) demonstrate that social media use enhances career-related decision flexibility through increased self-efficacy and the internalisation of work values. Similarly, Ma et al. (2025) find that digital engagement shapes career exploration behaviours by altering perceptions of opportunity and competitive pressure. In the Indian context, where youth frequently rely on digital platforms for informational and aspirational cues, social media may therefore serve as a powerful efficacy-building environment.

However, the impact of social media engagement on career self-efficacy is unlikely to be unidirectional. Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others, and digital platforms intensify upward comparison processes. Jin et al. (2024) show that upward social comparison on social media can increase employment anxiety and negatively affect self-esteem among youth. For Indian students navigating competitive examinations and limited high-status job opportunities, constant exposure to curated achievements may either inspire confidence or undermine it. Consequently, social media engagement is theorised to influence career self-efficacy through both motivational and comparative pathways.

Proposition 1: Social media engagement is significantly associated with career self-efficacy among Indian youth, such that exposure to career-related content influences beliefs about occupational competence.

Beyond self-efficacy, SCCT highlights the importance of outcome expectations and work values in shaping career intentions. Social media environments frequently portray certain professions as financially rewarding, flexible, globally mobile, or socially prestigious. These portrayals may recalibrate how youth evaluate career desirability. Li et al. (2025) provide empirical support for the mediating role of work values in linking social media use to job choice. Likewise, Ma et al. (2025) argue that social media-induced career pressure reshapes exploratory behaviour and perceived opportunity structures. In India's evolving labour market—where digital professions increasingly coexist with traditional occupational pathways—exposure to alternative professional lifestyles may shift youth priorities from security-based careers toward autonomy- and recognition-oriented roles.

Proposition 2: Social media engagement influences career selection intentions indirectly through its impact on work values and outcome expectations.

Social comparison processes further deepen this relationship. The algorithmic nature of digital platforms amplifies visibility of success, achievement, and upward mobility. Repeated comparison with high-performing peers or influencers may intensify aspiration while simultaneously increasing perceived competition. Jin et al. (2024) empirically establish that upward comparison contributes to employment anxiety and altered self-perception among youth. Within India's socially stratified and performance-oriented environment, these dynamics may significantly affect how youth evaluate the attainability of certain careers. Thus, social comparison functions as a mediating psychological mechanism between exposure and intention formation.

Proposition 3: Social comparison mediates the relationship between social media engagement and career selection intentions, such that upward comparison alters perceived attainability and aspiration intensity.

The framework further posits that career self-efficacy and work values jointly mediate the pathway from digital exposure to career intention. According to SCCT, self-efficacy beliefs influence whether individuals consider specific occupations viable, while outcome expectations shape the attractiveness of those occupations (Lent & Brown, 2013). When social media engagement enhances perceived competence and aligns work values with digitally portrayed success models, the likelihood of forming strong career intentions increases. Conversely, when comparison reduces self-efficacy or distorts outcome expectations, career indecision may result. Therefore, psychological mediation is central to understanding the digital-career nexus.

Proposition 4: Career self-efficacy and work values jointly mediate the relationship between social media engagement and career selection intentions among Indian youth.

While these mediating processes describe how social media influences career decision-making, Digital Capital Theory introduces important boundary conditions. Ragnedda (2018) conceptualises digital capital as the skills, competencies, and resources that enable individuals to derive benefits from digital technologies. Youth with higher digital literacy are better equipped to critically evaluate online career narratives, distinguish promotional content from realistic pathways, and triangulate digital information with labour market data. In contrast, limited digital literacy may heighten susceptibility to unrealistic portrayals, impulsive career shifts, or aspirational inflation without strategic planning. Consequently, the strength and direction of social media's influence depend on digital competencies.

Proposition 5: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between social media engagement and career self-efficacy, such that the relationship is stronger and more constructive among youth with higher digital capital.

Finally, socio-economic context and institutional guidance are expected to shape the translation of digital exposure into actionable career outcomes. Access to financial resources, mentoring networks, quality education, and parental guidance influences whether online inspiration can be operationalised into real career pathways. Youth from advantaged backgrounds may convert digital exposure into strategic skill acquisition and networking, whereas those from constrained environments may encounter structural barriers despite heightened aspirations. Thus, structural context interacts with digital exposure in shaping final intentions.

Proposition 6: Socio-economic background and institutional guidance moderate the relationship between social media engagement and career selection intentions, influencing the extent to which digital exposure translates into committed career choices.

Collectively, these propositions articulate a multi-layered explanation of how social media influences career selection among Indian youth. Rather than presenting social media as inherently beneficial or detrimental, the framework conceptualises it as a psychologically mediated and structurally conditioned influence. By extending SCCT into digitally mediated environments, integrating social comparison processes, and incorporating digital capital as a moderating construct, this study advances a nuanced theoretical account of career development in the contemporary Indian context.

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present study develops a theoretically integrated framework to explain how social media engagement influences career selection intentions among youth in India. By synthesising Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Capital Theory, this paper moves beyond descriptive accounts of digital influence and provides a structured explanation of the psychological and contextual mechanisms through which social media shapes vocational decision-making. The discussion below outlines the theoretical, contextual, and practical contributions of this framework.

2.1. Extending Social Cognitive Career Theory into Digital Environments

One of the primary theoretical contributions of this paper lies in extending SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2013) into the domain of digitally mediated environments. SCCT traditionally conceptualises career development as a function of learning experiences derived from family, school, work exposure, and social modelling. However, the rapid expansion of social media has introduced a new and powerful category of learning experiences that are algorithmically curated, visually immersive, and socially amplified.

This study argues that social media platforms function as contemporary sites of vicarious learning. Exposure to influencers, entrepreneurs, professionals, and peer success narratives contributes to the formation of career self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. Empirical research supports this extension. Li et al. (2025) demonstrate that social media use enhances job choice flexibility through work values and self-efficacy, while Ma et al. (2025) show that digital pressure reshapes career exploration behaviour. By positioning social media as a structured learning environment within SCCT, this paper updates career development theory for the digital age.

Importantly, the framework also recognises that digital learning experiences are not neutral. Unlike traditional mentorship or classroom exposure, social media content is curated for engagement, visibility, and emotional resonance. As a result, the formation of self-efficacy and outcome expectations may occur under conditions of selective representation. This insight enriches SCCT by introducing platform architecture as an environmental variable influencing career cognition.

2.2. Integrating Social Comparison into Career Development Theory

A second theoretical contribution involves embedding Social Comparison Theory within vocational decision-making processes. While SCCT accounts for self-efficacy formation through observational learning, it does not

explicitly foreground the emotional consequences of upward comparison. Digital platforms intensify comparison processes by continuously displaying curated achievements, professional milestones, and lifestyle indicators. Jin et al. (2024) empirically demonstrate that upward comparison on social media contributes to employment anxiety and altered self-esteem among youth. In competitive contexts such as India—where academic achievement and professional success carry strong social value—these comparison dynamics may be particularly influential. The present framework proposes that social comparison operates as a mediating psychological mechanism that shapes perceived attainability of careers.

This integration advances career theory by recognising that digital exposure influences not only cognitive evaluations but also emotional regulation and aspiration intensity. In doing so, the framework provides a more comprehensive account of how youth interpret professional possibilities within algorithm-driven environments.

2.3. Introducing Digital Capital as a Boundary Condition

A third contribution lies in incorporating Digital Capital Theory (Ragnedda, 2018) as a moderating construct within career development processes. Existing literature often treats social media use as a homogeneous variable, measured primarily through frequency or intensity. However, the ability to derive meaningful career-related benefits from digital engagement depends heavily on digital literacy, critical evaluation skills, and network access. By positioning digital literacy as a moderator, this study acknowledges that the same exposure may produce divergent outcomes. Youth with higher digital capital may critically assess online career narratives, cross-verify information, and strategically leverage networking platforms. In contrast, limited digital literacy may increase susceptibility to unrealistic expectations or aspirational inflation without planning.

This contribution is theoretically significant because it shifts the discourse from “Does social media influence career choice?” to “Under what conditions does social media constructively influence career development?” Such a conditional approach strengthens the explanatory precision of the framework.

2.4. Contextual Contribution: The Indian Youth Landscape

Beyond theoretical integration, this paper contributes contextually by situating the framework within India’s socio-economic and demographic environment. India hosts one of the world’s largest youth populations, alongside rapid digital penetration and expanding social media engagement. At the same time, youth face structural challenges including competitive entrance examinations, limited high-quality job availability, regional disparities, and socio-economic stratification.

Within this context, social media functions both as an opportunity amplifier and a comparison accelerator. It introduces youth to global career possibilities and alternative professional identities while simultaneously intensifying perceived competition. The framework acknowledges this duality and argues that social media’s influence is embedded within India’s broader developmental realities.

By foregrounding socio-economic background and institutional guidance as moderating variables, the study highlights how structural resources determine whether digital exposure translates into actionable career trajectories. This contextual grounding enhances the global relevance of the framework, as other emerging economies share similar digital-demographic transitions.

2.5. Reconceptualising Social Media: From Tool to Ecosystem

Another important conceptual advancement of this paper is the reconceptualisation of social media from a mere communication tool to a career-shaping ecosystem. Rather than treating platforms as passive information channels, the framework recognises their algorithmic structures, influencer economies, peer validation systems, and monetisation incentives. This ecological perspective allows scholars to consider how platform design influences exposure patterns, how visibility metrics shape aspiration, and how digital trends redefine professional legitimacy. In doing so, the study encourages career development research to engage more deeply with digital sociology and media studies.

2.6.Theoretical Synthesis and Advancement

Collectively, the framework advances existing scholarship in five key ways. First, it extends SCCT into digitally mediated contexts by conceptualising social media as a structured learning environment. Second, it integrates social comparison processes into career cognition models. Third, it introduces digital capital as a boundary condition that explains differential outcomes. Fourth, it contextualises these dynamics within India's youth labour landscape. Fifth, it shifts the discourse from simplistic causal claims to multi-layered, mediated, and moderated relationships. In essence, the study argues that social media does not directly dictate career choices. Instead, it reshapes how youth perceive competence, success, desirability, and attainability. These psychological shifts, conditioned by digital and socio-economic capital, ultimately influence career selection intentions.

CONCLUSION

This study develops an integrated theoretical framework to explain how social media engagement influences career selection intentions among Indian youth. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Capital Theory, the paper argues that social media does not directly determine career choices but reshapes the cognitive and emotional processes through which young people evaluate occupational possibilities. Exposure to curated professional narratives influences career self-efficacy, work values, and outcome expectations, while upward social comparison can simultaneously motivate aspiration and intensify employment anxiety. The overall impact is therefore psychologically mediated and structurally conditioned by digital literacy, socio-economic background, and institutional support. By extending traditional career development theory into digitally mediated environments, this study offers a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of youth career formation in contemporary India.

Implications

The findings highlight the need to integrate digital literacy within career education and counselling practices. Educational institutions and policymakers must recognise social media as a central component of youths' career ecosystems and equip students with the skills to critically evaluate online career portrayals. Strengthening digital capital and structured mentorship systems can help ensure that social media functions as an empowering informational resource rather than a source of distorted expectations. The study also underscores the importance of aligning digital exposure with realistic labour market insights to support informed and confident career decision-making.

Future Research Directions

Future research should empirically test the proposed mediated–moderated framework using longitudinal and multi-method designs to capture how digital exposure shapes career development over time. Studies comparing different social media platforms, socio-economic groups, and rural–urban contexts would enhance contextual precision. Further investigation into the role of psychological well-being, employment anxiety, and intervention-based digital literacy programmes would strengthen both theoretical refinement and practical application in the evolving digital-career landscape.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect any personal or financial relationships that could influence the research outcomes.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

1. Adzovie, R. H., Namale, S. M., Baadu, F., Ntaah, T., Gbedenyo, H. A., Anaman, A. E., Dwamena, E. A., & Boamah, D. (2025). Moderating role of peers and social media in Ghanaian students' career choices and aspirations. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 4589–4596. <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010352>
2. Appel, H., Gerlach, A. L., & Crusius, J. (2016). The interplay between Facebook use, social comparison, envy, and depression. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 44–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.006>.
3. Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>
4. boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.
5. Chae, J. (2018). Explaining females' envy toward social media influencers. *Media Psychology*, 21(2), 246–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1328312>
6. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
7. Gössling, B., & Rothleitner, H. (2025). Career choice and the impact of social media: Insights from a study of adolescents in Austria navigating the transition into secondary education. In C. Nägele, B. E. Stalder, F. Kaiser, M. Malloch, & N. Kersh (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research* (Vol. 8, pp. 109–115). VETNET/OAPublishing. <https://doi.org/10.21240/vetcon/ecer/2025/30.X>
8. Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 764–791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055>
9. Jin, X. B., et al. (2024). Urban–rural integration in the new era of China: Challenges and pathways. *Journal of Natural Resources*, 39, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.31497/zrzyxb.20240101>
10. Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
11. Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2013). Social cognitive model of career self-management: Toward a unifying view of adaptive career behavior across the life span. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(4), 557–568. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033446>
12. Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
13. Li, F., Shi, M., & Feng, R. (2025). Social media use and job choices: The mediating roles of work values and self-efficacy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1485663. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1485663>
14. Ma, X., Yang, H., Yang, F., Shang, L., Xie, M., & Ma, L. (2025). Correction: Ma et al. (2025). Knowledge mapping of geography examinations in Chinese national entrance examination to universities: Insights from four decades of research. *Education Sciences*, 15(12), 1654. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15121654>
15. Nakamura, K., Inomata, T., & Uno, A. (2020). Left Amygdala Regulates the Cerebral Reading Network During Fast Emotion Word Processing. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00001>
16. Nikolaou, I. (2014). Social networking web sites in job search and employee recruitment. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 22(2), 179–189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12067>
17. Ragnedda, M. (2018). Conceptualizing digital capital. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35(8), 2366–2375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.10.006>
18. Ruth Priya, A., & Vasikar, V. (2023). Analyzing the influence of social networking sites in shaping career aspirations among youth in Chennai. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(4), 2926–2933. <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v29i4.7594>
19. Sardorbekovna, T. K. (2025). THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MASS MEDIA ON CAREER CHOICE AMONG YOUTH. *International Scientific Journal*, 4(10). <https://doi.org/https://zenodo.org/records/17308433>

20. Tkachuk, V. V., Yechkalo, Y. V., Bielikova, O. A., Kolomoiets, T. H., Zinchenko, V. M., & Semerikov, S. O. (2024). Social media as a tool for career guidance in higher education. In Proceedings of the 7th International Workshop on Augmented Reality in Education (AREdu 2024) (pp. 282–292). CEUR Workshop Proceedings.
21. Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2013). The differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication*, 63(2), 221–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12024>
22. Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3, 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>