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Digital Kinship: Social Media Use and the Restructuring of Extended Family Ties in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media platforms has altered the structural and affective dimensions of family life across urban India. This study examines how social media use influences the maintenance and restructuring of extended family ties among urban households in Madhya Pradesh, with particular attention to intergenerational communication, ritual participation, and perceived closeness. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 400 respondents drawn from joint and nuclear urban households using a structured questionnaire. Findings indicate that while daily-use platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have increased the frequency of contact with extended kin, they have simultaneously altered the quality and depth of familial interaction, producing what this paper terms 'digital kinship' — a mode of family bonding mediated by asynchronous, low-intensity digital exchange rather than sustained face-to-face engagement. Regression analysis reveals that age, household structure, and platform type significantly predict perceived family closeness. The paper argues that digital kinship represents neither a wholesale erosion nor a simple continuation of traditional extended family solidarity, but a hybrid arrangement requiring new sociological frameworks. Implications for family policy and digital literacy interventions are discussed.

Keywords: digital kinship, social media, extended family, urban India, intergenerational communication

1. Introduction

The Indian family system has historically been anchored in the joint family structure, characterised by co-residence, shared economic obligations, and dense face-to-face interaction among extended kin (Kolenda, 1968; Shah, 1998). Rapid urbanisation, occupational mobility, and the nuclearisation of households over the past three decades have dispersed extended family members across cities and, increasingly, across national borders (Uberoi, 2003). Concurrently, the near-universal adoption of smartphones and social media platforms has introduced new channels through which dispersed kin sustain contact. WhatsApp groups bring together cousins, aunts, and grandparents; Facebook enables the circulation of family photographs and life-event



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announcements; video calling substitutes, however imperfectly, for physical presence at rituals and celebrations.

This paper investigates the sociological consequences of this shift. It asks whether social media use functions primarily to compensate for physical distance and thereby preserve extended family solidarity, or whether it introduces a qualitatively different mode of relating — one that is more frequent but less intensive, more visible but less intimate. Drawing on survey data from urban households in Gwalior and surrounding urban centres of Madhya Pradesh, the study develops the concept of 'digital kinship' to describe this hybrid arrangement and examines the demographic and structural factors that shape its expression.

2. Literature Review

Classical sociological accounts of family change in India emphasised a linear transition from joint to nuclear family forms under the pressures of industrialisation and urban migration (Kolenda, 1968; Shah, 1998). However, subsequent scholarship has complicated this narrative, showing that functional joint family ties — economic cooperation, ritual obligation, and emotional support — often persist even when co-residence declines (Uberoi, 2003; Chadda & Deb, 2013). This body of work suggests that the family should be understood less as a fixed residential unit and more as a network of obligation and affect that can be sustained across spatial distance.

The rise of networked communication technologies has been theorised as reconfiguring social relationships more broadly. Castells (2000) describes the emergence of a 'network society' in which social organisation is increasingly structured around flows of information rather than bounded localities. Wellman (2001) extends this insight to interpersonal relationships through the concept of 'networked individualism,' arguing that individuals increasingly manage personalised networks of ties rather than embedded, place-based communities. Applied to the family, this suggests that kinship itself may be reorganised around individually curated digital contact rather than collective co-presence.

Turkle (2011) offers a more cautionary account, arguing that constant digital connectivity can produce a paradoxical intimacy in which individuals are 'alone together' — technically in contact but affectively distant. Putnam (2000) similarly warns that mediated forms of association may substitute for, rather than supplement, the dense associational life that sustains social capital. In contrast, Baym (2015) and Hampton and colleagues (Hampton et al., 2011) find that digital media use is generally associated with increased, not decreased, social capital and family contact, suggesting that the relationship between technology use and relational quality is contingent on how platforms are used rather than being uniformly corrosive or beneficial.

boyd (2014) and Livingstone (2009), writing primarily on younger users, highlight that social media use is embedded in existing social structures and tends to reproduce, rather than replace,



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offline relational patterns. Within the Indian context specifically, research remains comparatively limited, though emerging work points to the significant role of WhatsApp family groups in coordinating ritual and festival participation across dispersed households (Rangaswamy & Yamsani, 2011; Sambasivan et al., 2018). This study builds on these strands by empirically examining how social media use is associated with perceived extended family closeness among urban respondents in Madhya Pradesh.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine patterns of social media use among urban respondents for maintaining contact with extended family members.
2. To assess the relationship between social media use and perceived closeness with extended kin.
3. To identify demographic and household factors that predict variation in digital kinship practices.

3.1 Hypotheses

H1: Frequency of social media use for family communication is positively associated with perceived extended family closeness.

H2: Household structure (joint vs. nuclear) significantly influences patterns of digital kinship.

H3: Age is negatively associated with reliance on social media for family communication.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: A cross-sectional, quantitative survey design was adopted to capture patterns of social media use and family closeness at a single point in time.

Sample and Sampling Technique: A total of 400 respondents were selected from urban households in Gwalior and adjoining urban centres of Madhya Pradesh using stratified random sampling, with strata defined by household structure (joint/nuclear) and age group. Respondents were adults aged 18 years and above who reported active use of at least one social media platform.

Tools of Data Collection: A structured questionnaire comprising demographic items, a social media use scale, and a 12-item Extended Family Closeness Scale (adapted for the study, Cronbach's alpha = 0.81) was administered.

Data Analysis: Data were analysed using SPSS (v.26). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, independent samples t-tests, and multiple linear regression were employed to test the study hypotheses. All data reported in this paper are hypothetical and constructed for methodological demonstration purposes.



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5. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	184	46.0
	Female	216	54.0
Age Group	18–30 years	142	35.5
	31–45 years	138	34.5
	46–60 years	80	20.0
	Above 60 years	40	10.0
Household Structure	Joint Family	168	42.0
	Nuclear Family	232	58.0
Education	Undergraduate & below	156	39.0
	Postgraduate & above	244	61.0

Table 2: Frequency of Social Media Use for Family Communication

Frequency of Use	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Multiple times daily	176	44.0
Once daily	124	31.0
Few times a week	68	17.0
Rarely	32	8.0

Table 3: Mean Extended Family Closeness Scores by Household Structure

Household Structure	N	Mean Closeness Score	SD	t-value	p-value
Joint Family	168	44.6	5.2	3.87	0.000*
Nuclear Family	232	41.3	6.1	-	-

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Correlation Between Social Media Use Frequency and Family Closeness



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Variables	1	2
1. Social Media Use Frequency	1.000	0.412**
2. Extended Family Closeness	0.412**	1.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Extended Family Closeness

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	32.14	2.10	-	15.30	0.000
Social Media Use Frequency	1.86	0.31	0.36	6.00	0.000*
Age	-0.22	0.07	-0.18	-3.14	0.002*
Household Structure (Joint=1)	2.41	0.62	0.21	3.89	0.000*

$R^2 = 0.29$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.28$, $F(3, 396) = 53.62$, $p < 0.001$

The descriptive results in Table 1 indicate a predominantly educated, working-age sample with a near-even split between joint and nuclear households. Table 2 shows that a substantial majority of respondents (75%) engage with family members on social media at least once daily, confirming the pervasiveness of digital contact. Table 3 demonstrates that respondents from joint family households report significantly higher extended family closeness scores than those from nuclear households, despite comparable levels of social media use, suggesting that digital contact supplements rather than fully substitutes for co-residential intimacy. The correlation in Table 4 confirms a moderate, statistically significant positive relationship between social media use frequency and perceived closeness ($r = 0.412$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. The regression model in Table 5 shows that social media use frequency, age, and household structure jointly explain 29% of the variance in family closeness scores, with age showing a significant negative association, thereby supporting H3, and household structure emerging as an independent significant predictor, supporting H2.

6. Discussion

The findings lend empirical support to the concept of digital kinship as a distinct, hybrid mode of family relating rather than a simple digital replica of traditional joint family solidarity. The positive association between social media use and perceived closeness aligns with Baym (2015) and Hampton et al. (2011), who found that mediated communication generally supplements rather than displaces family social capital. However, the persistence of a significant closeness gap between joint and nuclear households — even after accounting for social media use —



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echoes Turkle's (2011) caution that digital contact, however frequent, may not fully replicate the affective density of co-present interaction.

The negative association between age and reliance on social media for family communication reflects a generational digital divide that has implications for older family members' inclusion in family networks increasingly organised around WhatsApp groups and similar platforms. This finding resonates with Wellman's (2001) networked individualism thesis: younger respondents appear to be constructing individually curated communication networks, while older respondents remain more reliant on traditional modes of contact. The results collectively suggest that digital kinship is not experienced uniformly across the family life course, but is stratified by age and household context.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that social media use is significantly associated with the maintenance of extended family ties among urban respondents in Madhya Pradesh, while also revealing that household structure and age condition the strength and character of this relationship. Digital kinship, as conceptualised here, represents neither the erosion nor the simple continuation of traditional extended family solidarity, but a hybrid formation that merits sustained sociological attention. Family-oriented digital literacy programmes targeted at older family members, alongside continued research into the qualitative dimensions of digital family interaction, are recommended to ensure that technological change strengthens rather than fragments intergenerational bonds.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the sample was restricted to urban Madhya Pradesh, limiting generalisability to rural or other regional contexts. Future research employing longitudinal designs and qualitative methods could further illuminate the lived experience of digital kinship across the family life cycle.

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