

Digital Culture, Identity Development and Relationship Dynamics in the movie “Kho Gaye Hum Kahan”: A Psychological Perspective

¹ Raghav Sharma, ² Unnati Rana & ³ Aakriti Varshney

¹ Master's student, Department of Psychology & Mental Health, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, U.P.

² Master's student, Department of Psychology & Mental Health, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, U.P.

³ Head & Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Deptt. of Clinical Psychology, Shanti Home KNEUS Hospital, Greater Noida, U.P., India

Email – ¹rs4144999@gmail.com, ²unnatir24@gmail.com, ³aakriti.8210@gmail.com

Abstract: In today's digitally driven world, young adults are navigating identity and relationships in ways that are deeply influenced by digital culture. *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* (2023) serves as an illustrative portrayal of how digital validation, social comparison, and emotional disconnect shape the psychological experiences of its characters. This paper explores the film through various psychological theories. It delves into how the characters struggle with self-concept, fear of missing out (FOMO), and the pressure of curated online personas. The analysis shows that curated digital identities often lead to confusion, low self-esteem, and difficulties in forming meaningful connections. Ultimately, the film serves as a mirror reflecting the inner conflicts and mental health challenges many young adults face as they try to find authenticity in world driven by likes, filters, and followers.

Key Words: Digital culture, digital validation, social comparison, fear of missing out, *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digitalization has been deeply embedded in the everyday experiences nowadays among individuals. Although usage rates can vary depending on national and demographic factors, adolescents and young adults remain the most prominent users of digital technologies, including the internet, smartphones, and social media. A recent global study covering 18 economically advanced nations, such as Canada, Israel, Japan, Spain, Hungary and Malaysia reported that over 93% of emerging and young adults own a smartphone or have internet access, and more than 84% are active on social media [1]. Current empirical research on the intersection of digital media and youth identity has advanced in a somewhat disjointed manner, with a predominant emphasis on identity content-what individuals reflect upon when considering who they are in different areas of life. However, much of this work has not fully engaged with identity processes, such as the exploration and commitment activities that underpin identity formation [2,3]. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are recognized as key life stages for active identity development, characterized by ongoing exploration, commitment, and at times, reconsideration across multiple domains-personal, vocational, gender, sexual, and ethnic-racial [4,5,6,7].

The relationship between identity and digital environments is both dynamic and reciprocal. To better understand this interplay, two theoretical perspectives from psychology and communication are particularly informative: the person-environment framework [8,9] and the Media Practice Model [10,11]. The person-environment framework explains how individuals' characteristics influence the environments they are drawn to (selection), how they actively shape or modify those environments (manipulation), and how they may unintentionally provoke reactions from these environments (evocation). In parallel, the Media Practice Model highlights how identity influences media choices (selection), shapes engagement with media (interaction), and affects how individuals incorporate or resist media messages (application). Examining identity in relation to digital environments through four mechanisms-selection, manipulation, evocation, and application (see Table-1), provides a structured and flexible approach to organizing existing research.

Mechanisms	Characteristics
Selection	It explores how identity-related processes influence individuals' choices to engage with specific digital platforms.
Manipulation	It focuses on how individuals actively shape their digital environments through online self-presentation and identity signaling.
Evocation	It highlights how digital algorithms respond to identity cues.
Application	It highlights how feedback, social comparison, and meaning making within digital environments may influence one's developing sense of identity.

Table-1: Key processes underlying the relationship between identity and digital context

Digital Culture and Relationship Dynamics

Young adults appear to use digital communication as a central part of romantic relationship development and expression, aligning with Subrahmanyam and Šmahel (2011) framework [12]. Research has shown that couples frequently connect online, share intimate content, and display emotional aspect of their relationships publicly, which in turn may influence how the relationship is viewed overall [13,14]. Research has increasingly turned its attention to the darker side of digital communication in romantic relationships, particularly among young adults, revealing a range of complex and, at times, troubling dynamics. Online jealousy-characterized by emotional responses triggered through exposure to a partner's digital interactions-has consistently been associated with lower relationship satisfaction [15] and heightened risk of psychological and physical abuse [16]. These findings underscore how seemingly passive digital observation can have significant emotional consequences within romantic contexts.

Digital media, particularly dating apps and social platforms have transformed romantic relationships by making initial connection more accessible. However, this ease can reduce the value of face-to-face interactions and weaken long-term commitment. The abundance of choices and anonymity may encourage a disposable view of partners, complicating emotional intimacy. While these platforms can strengthen social networks, they also introduce challenges like trust issues, dissatisfaction, and feeling of neglect, especially in long-distance relationships.

Another digital pattern of concern is intrusive behavior, such as repeatedly messaging a partner after conflict or breakup. These actions often extend offline and are indicative of unhealthy relationship dynamics [17]. Additionally, while monitoring a partner's online activity may seem subtle, its impact on relationship health is still debated, with some findings suggesting no clear consensus on whether it is harmful or not [18].

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan Movie Review

The 2023 Bollywood film Kho Gaye Hum Kahan, directed by Arjun Varain Singh, explores how identity, friendship, mental health, and relationships are shaped by life in the digital age. Set in Mumbai, the story follows three close friends in their mid-twenties: Ahana (Ananya Panday), who is healing from a recent breakup and seeking emotional clarity; Imaad (Siddhant Chaturvedi), a stand-up comedian who hides deep childhood trauma behind humor and casual relationships; and Neil (Adarsh Gourav), a fitness trainer trying to build his career while struggling with feelings of insecurity and comparison with others.

Ahana, an MBA graduate from the London School of Economics, works as a corporate consultant. She puts in a lot of effort-especially in making presentations-but her manager always takes the credit, leaving her frustrated and unsure about her future career path. At the same time, her boyfriend Rohan suddenly asks for a break, which confuses and hurts her deeply. When she finds out through social media that he is now dating someone else, Tanya, she feels even more heartbroken. In response, Ahana starts posting on social media to get his attention. Over time, she becomes more focused on the likes and comments, and the validation she receives online begins to affect how she sees herself. Her self-esteem starts depending on how others react to her posts, showing how both personal and professional setbacks are impacting her emotionally and mentally.

Imaad, a stand-up comedian, struggles with deep-rooted emotional wounds stemming from his early childhood. The loss of his mother at the age of six and the trauma of sexual abuse by his father's business partner have significantly impacted his sense of self-worth and emotional security. As a result, Imaad finds it difficult to build meaningful or lasting relationships. To cope, he often engages in emotionally detached encounters, meeting women on Tinder under a false identity, "Zeeshan", and frequently leaving after one-night stands. However, this pattern begins to shift when he meets Simran Kohli-an older woman and a photographer-with whom he feels a rare emotional connection. For the first time, Imaad begins to open up and allow vulnerability into his life. Despite this developing bond, Imaad continues to use Tinder, unable to let go of the safety and control that casual relationships provide. Even when close friends like

Ahana and Neil encourage him to delete the app, he resists. His behavior reflects an underlying fear of commitment and intimacy, shaped by unresolved trauma and a deep-seated fear of abandonment.

Neil, from a modest middle-class background, aspires to open his own gym and make a name for himself in the fitness industry. Constantly exposed to more successful gym trainers on social media, he finds himself caught in a cycle of comparison and self-doubt. In his pursuit of recognition, he becomes eager to attract high-profile clients. At the same time, he is in a secret relationship with popular influencer Laxmi Lalvani, adding further pressure to maintain an image of success while struggling with his own insecurities.

During a tense moment, Imaad jokingly calls Neil's relationship fake, triggering a strong reaction. Neil responds with verbal and physical aggression, leading to a conflict between the two. This deeply worries Ahana, who has recently quit her job to open a gym with them. Meanwhile, Ahana's growing presence on social media draws Rohan's attention. At a friend's wedding, he flirts with her, and they end up hooking up. The next morning, Ahana finds herself blocked and abandoned. Hurt and humiliated, she confronts Rohan at his birthday party, revealing their hookup in front of Tanya. As she leaves, Rohan insults her, prompting Imaad to step in. When Rohan attempts to hit Imaad, Neil unexpectedly arrives and punches Rohan, reconciling with Imaad as they leave together with Ahana.

Later, at a comedy show, Imaad bravely opens up about being sexually abused as a child. He tearfully explains how this trauma shaped his fear of intimacy but expresses his desire to reclaim his life. The audience gives him a standing ovation. Backstage, Ahana and Neil embrace him in support. This moment marks a turning point for all three—they begin to take responsibility for their lives, reduces their reliance on social media, and eventually fulfill their shared dream of opening a gym together.

While their social media profiles portray happiness and success, the film reveals their inner battles with loneliness, self-doubt, and emotional pain—highlighting the gap between online appearances and real life. The film focuses on the strong influence of digital culture, such as the constant need for connection, the desire for approval or validation through likes and comments, and the harmful effects of comparing oneself to others online. These issues are especially important during emerging adulthood, a stage where young people explore who they are and seek meaningful relationship.

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan also examines how social media can worsen insecurities and lead to harmful behaviors like monitoring a partner's online activity, compulsive checking, and cyberstalking, often driven by fear of rejection or abandonment. The film also highlights the pressures from unrealistic beauty standards, the fear of missing out (FOMO), and the need to present a perfect image, all of which can harm mental health.

Finally, the movie highlights a paradox of digital life: while smartphones and social media help people stay connected and express themselves, they can also create emotional distance, distort how people see themselves, and lead to dissatisfaction in relationships.

2. METHOD

Aim: To examine how the movie 'Kho Gaye Hum Kahan' reflects the psychological effects of digital culture on identity formation and interpersonal relationships among young adults.

Procedure: To conduct this review, the researcher engaged deeply with the film 'Kho Gaye Hum Kahan' by watching it multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative, character trajectories, and underlying psychological themes. Key scenes and dialogues were noted for their psychological relevance. Character behavior was analyzed using different psychological theories.

3. DISCUSSION

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan is more than just a story about three friends; it offers a powerful psychological reflection on how young adults today navigate identity, mental health, and relationships in a digital world. The film's narrative sheds light on the growing disconnects between carefully constructed online personas and the more vulnerable, often unspoken emotional realities of everyday life. In attempting to feel seen and accepted, many individuals in the digital age increasingly face the risk of losing touch with their authentic selves, becoming trapped in cycles of comparison, external validation, and emotional suppression.

Ahana's experiences reflect the core ideas of Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Her exposure to idealized social media content leads her to associate self-worth with how others perceive her online. Others' opinions—whether from friends or the public—strongly influences an individual's self-esteem. Positive feedback tends to significantly boost self-esteem, whereas negative feedback can greatly diminish it [19]. Her dialogues, "Instagram ke filters se zyada meri asli zindagi filters ho chuki hai" and "Sabko lagta hai hum itne khush hain, par asal mein andar se khali hain", clearly reflect this inner conflict. These lines show the emotional cost of constantly trying to look perfect while feeling empty

and disconnected inside-a reality that many in today's digital age experience. Furthermore, Ahana's obsessive pursuit of validation through social media posts in response to her breakup with Rohan reflects anxious attachment tendencies, where she seeks reassurance from external sources rather than cultivating a stable sense of self. Ahana may display projection, a defense mechanism. After her heartbreak, she acts out on social media and projects her need for validation onto her online image. Studies also show that people who engage in obsessive online contact after a breakup often do the same offline, and such behavior is linked to poor relationship quality [17]. Studies also found that users may experience negative emotions like envy, frustration, and disappointment when they receive low engagement or compare their validations with others, with responses varying by individual traits and context.

Imaad's psychological struggles are best understood through Bowlby and Ainsworth's Attachment Theory. The early loss of his mother and exposure to abuse disrupted the formation of secure attachment style, resulting in what appears to be an avoidant attachment in adulthood. This is evident in his tendency to avoid emotional intimacy and instead engage in casual dating, indicating a fear of vulnerability. His coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, further highlight his emotional difficulties and reduced resilience. His statement, "Jab bachpan mein dard sehna seekh liya toh bade hoke bhi adat nahi chutti," illustrates the long-term effects of unresolved childhood trauma on emotional regulation, trust, well-being and interpersonal behavior. When Simran, the girl he met on Tinder, asked him, "When did you feel that you were funny?", he replied, "Shayad tab jab main life mein sabse zyada sad tha." This response reflects that Imaad was using reaction formation as a defense mechanism-masking his deep sadness through humor. The film also reflects ideas from Freud's psychosexual stages of development. Imaad may exhibit a fixation at the genital stage, which could help explain his tendency towards casual dating and one-night stands.

Neil's internal struggles, influenced by the pressure of social comparison and career ambition, highlight a conflict between personal life and professional success. His obsession with the social media-driven success of other fitness trainers underscores the impact of digital comparison on self-worth, demonstrating how constant exposure to others' curated lives on social media fosters feeling of inadequacy. Neil occasionally shows regression, especially when Imaad jokes about his relationship shows emotional immaturity under stress. Studies also shown that social media exposes users to idealized versions of others' lives, encouraging upward social comparisons. This pursuit of likes and validation often leads to feelings of envy and inadequacy [20]. Similarly, studies also shown that lack of validation or negative feedback on social media can harm self-esteem and self-worth, often leading to self-doubt, insecurity, and even social anxiety, as individuals view these responses as personal rejection or social disapproval. Studies also revealed that availability heuristic and social proof bias lead individuals to value highly engaged content as more accurate or popular, pushing them to seek validation over authenticity. Meanwhile, confirmation bias drives users to engage with like-minded content, reinforcing existing beliefs and contributing to echo chambers and misinformation [21].

Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are especially relevant to understanding the character's development. Imaad's struggle with intimacy aligns with Erikson's intimacy vs. isolation stage, while his career confusion reflects identity vs. role confusion, as he is unsure about where to invest his time and money. Ahana shows sign of identity vs. role confusion as well. Despite academic and professional achievements, she feels unsure about her future and seeks external validation, especially from social media and her ex-boyfriend. Her emotional vulnerability suggests that her identity is still developing. Neil also experiences Role Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation. His dream of opening a gym is clouded by financial pressure, comparison with others, and his need for external success. His secret relationship with Laxmi reflects his insecurity and fear of not being "enough".

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory provides a comprehensive framework to understand the psychological dynamics in the film. At the microsystem level, Imaad's early abuse and loss impact his emotional detachment. Ahana faces parental pressure and the influence of friends and social media. Neil's career and friendships shapes his worldview. At mesosystem level, Imaad's past trauma influences his ability to sustain emotional bonds. Ahana's self-image struggles, shaped by her interactions with social media, impact her relationships. Neil's professional stress affects his personal life and friendships. At the exosystem level, external indirect pressures-such as social media standards, economic stressors, and the fitness industry-affect all three characters. Ahana struggles with its unrealistic beauty standards. Imaad's past trauma indirectly affects his adult emotions and behaviors. Neil's work-life balance pressures and comparison with more successful gym trainer by himself impact his personal relationships. At the macrosystem, the broader cultural narrative about success, beauty, and happiness is shaped by digital validation. The film critiques a society where likes, followers, and filters define one's identity and happiness. At the chronosystem, Imaad's childhood trauma has long-term effects, influencing his adult relationships. Ahana's identity crisis is shaped by growing up in the digital age, where self-worth is linked to online perfection. Neil's struggles reflect the millennial and GenZ conflict of career vs personal life.

Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Leon Festinger, is relevant to understanding the psychological dynamics in the film, which highlights the innate human tendency to evaluate oneself in relation to others. In the age of social media, this process is intensified as individuals are constantly exposed to idealized portrayals of others' lives.

Upward comparisons-viewing others as more successful or admired-can evoke feelings of inadequacy and a heightened need for social validation. In contrast, downward comparisons may offer brief boosts to self-esteem by fostering a sense of relative advantage. Yet, both forms of comparison can distort self-perception, suggesting a fragile balance between self-evaluation and psychological well-being in digital context. In Kho Gaye Hum Kahan, Ahana often finds herself caught in the trap of upward social comparison, especially after her breakup. As she scrolls through social media, she can't help but compare her life to her ex's new partner and polished influencers online. This constant comparison erodes her confidence, leaving her feeling insecure and not good enough, and craving validation through likes and attention on her own posts. Neil, too, struggles with upward comparison-but in his case, it's about measuring his worth against those in the fitness world who seem more successful or better connected. No matter how hard he works, he feels like he's falling short, which feeds into his self-doubt and frustration about where he stands in life. Through Ahana and Neil's experiences, the film gently reveals how social media can distort our self-image, making us question our worth by showing us only the highlights of other's lives.

The film also highlights the parent-child conflicts that arise during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Neil's arguments with his father over financial choices-such as buying multiple pairs of shoes and spending excessively on fitness supplements-represent a clash between generational values. His father's concern ("Humare pass tumhare doston jitne paise nahi hain, inko bachao") and Neil's response ("Yeh sab maine apne paise se kharida hai, apse nahi liya") depict a struggle for autonomy, reflecting identity assertion and the conflict between dependency and independence.

The emotional vulnerability of all three protagonists is portrayed through their inability to express feelings, reliance on digital validation, and unhealthy coping strategies. Imaad, uses humor and substance use to suppress his unresolved emotions. However, his public confession during his stand-up performance serves as a turning point, representing catharsis and a step toward authentic emotional expression. This scene highlights the importance of safe emotional outlets and social support systems in healing psychological wounds.

The film illustrated the wide-ranging mental health challenges young adults face due to digital overexposure: Anxiety and depression stemming from social comparison and unrealistic beauty standards. Eating disorders are linked to body image issues. Emotional isolation, where curated digital personas replace genuine connection. Identity confusion, where self-worth becomes dependent on social media validation.

Ahana's continuous need for approval, Imaad's emotional shutdown, and Neil's stress over career highlight the decline in psychological well-being and resilience in the digital era. These experiences reflect a broader generational crisis-feeling "lost" in a world of digital distraction, surface-level interactions, and suppressed emotions.

Future Implications

The insights from this analysis hold meaningful implications for future research, mental health practice, education, and media engagement. As digital culture continues to shape how young adults think, feel, and relate to others, future research can benefit from exploring these patterns across time and cultural contexts. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies could deepen our understanding of how sustained digital exposure impacts mental health, identity development, and emotional well-being. There is also a growing need for preventive and therapeutic interventions that equip young people with tools to navigate the digital world in emotionally healthy ways. Programs that promote emotion regulation skills, self-esteem, self-acceptance, media boundaries, and critical awareness of social comparison could foster resilience and healthier online engagement.

Mental health professionals-therapists, counselors, and psychologists-can apply these findings in clinical settings to better understand the unique digital pressures their clients face. Addressing concerns related to online validation, identity confusion, and low self-esteem can lead to more individualized and empathetic therapeutic support. Educational institutions are also able to promote digital well-being through targeted curriculum. Integrating lessons on emotional regulation, emotional well-being, self-reflection, self-regulation, and responsible digital engagement can empower students to engage more consciously with technology while strengthening meaningful social engagement.

4. CONCLUSION

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan offers more than just a story about friendship-it portrays a meaningful picture of how digital culture affects the cognitive and emotional states of today's young adults. By focusing on how people perceive themselves, build relationships, and cope with life in the age of social media, the film brings to light various psychological challenges. Ahana's constant need for approval, Imaad's emotional distance, and Neil's struggle with comparison and pressure reflect the inner conflicts many young people silently go through. These characters reflect psychological ideas like insecure attachment, defense mechanisms, and identity confusion, all of which help explain how difficult it can be to grow up and find one's place in a world shaped by likes, filters, and online validation.

The film also shows how trying to appear perfect online often comes at the cost of one's real emotions. It highlights how easy it is to hide behind digital masks while feeling lonely, anxious, empty, or unsure inside. But just as importantly, it shows how healing begins when people allow themselves to be vulnerable, open-up emotionally, and lean on each other for support.

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