



Jamia Millia Islamia

JMI **Journal of Management**

A Peer-Reviewed Research Journal

2026 [January - March]
Volume 2 | Issue 1

Published by
Faculty of Management Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia

Find this journal online:

<https://jmi.ac.in/ACADEMICS/Faculty-Of-Studies/Faculty-Of-Management-Studies/JMI-Journal-Of-Management>

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Examining blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations: a data-driven evaluation of security and integrity – Seema Garg and R. Sharma

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing blockchain technology in voting systems within international organizations. Specifically, it aims to conduct a comprehensive, data-driven evaluation of the security and integrity aspects of blockchain-based voting systems. By analyzing existing literature, case studies, and empirical data, this study endeavors to provide insights into the potential benefits and challenges of adopting blockchain technology for voting purposes in international settings. This study seeks to provide an understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations. Through a data-driven evaluation of security and integrity, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on blockchain's potential role in enhancing democratic processes and governance mechanisms at the international level.

Keywords : blockchain, technology, voting, data driven, organization

1. Introduction

Blockchain technology has garnered significant attention in recent years for its potential to revolutionize various industries, including finance, supply chain management, and healthcare. Among its promising applications, blockchain-based voting systems have emerged as a topic of interest, particularly in the realm of international organizations. The traditional methods of voting in such organizations often face challenges related to security, transparency, and integrity, prompting the exploration of alternative solutions.

The concept of blockchain technology revolves around the idea of a decentralized and distributed ledger, where transactions are recorded and verified across a network of nodes. Each transaction, or in the context of voting, each vote, is securely recorded in a block, which is cryptographically linked to the preceding block, forming a chain of blocks – hence the term "blockchain." this

distributed nature of blockchain ensures transparency and immutability, as transactions cannot be altered once they are recorded, thereby enhancing the integrity of the system.

In the context of voting systems, blockchain technology offers several potential advantages over traditional centralized methods. Firstly, it enhances security by eliminating single points of failure and reducing the risk of tampering or fraud. Since the data is stored across multiple nodes in the network, unauthorized manipulation of voting records becomes exceedingly difficult, if not practically impossible garg and pancholi (2023). Additionally, cryptographic techniques ensure the authenticity and confidentiality of votes, further bolstering the system's security.

Moreover, blockchain-based voting systems promote transparency and accountability by providing a verifiable record of all transactions. Each participant in the network can access and audit the entire history of votes, thereby increasing trust in the electoral process. This transparency not only deters fraudulent activities but also fosters confidence among stakeholders, including voters, election officials, and international observers. Furthermore, blockchain technology enables real-time validation and verification of votes, facilitating faster and more efficient election processes. Unlike traditional paper-based systems or centralized electronic voting machines, blockchain-based platforms can expedite the tabulation and aggregation of votes, thereby reducing the time and resources required for conducting elections in international organizations.

One primary concern is the scalability of blockchain networks, particularly when handling large volumes of votes and diverse participant nodes. Ensuring the scalability and performance of the blockchain infrastructure is crucial to maintaining the integrity and efficiency of the voting process. Additionally, issues related to governance, regulation, and legal frameworks may pose hurdles to the widespread adoption of blockchain technology in voting systems. International organizations operate within complex geopolitical environments, where consensus-building and compliance with legal norms are paramount. Therefore, any implementation of blockchain-based voting systems must navigate regulatory challenges and adhere to established norms and standards.

1.1. Evolution of voting systems in international organizations

The evolution of voting systems in international organizations reflects a dynamic interplay of political, technological, and social forces, shaped by the changing landscape of global governance and the demands for inclusivity, transparency, and efficiency. Since the establishment of the league of nations in the aftermath of world war i, international organizations have played a pivotal role in addressing global challenges and promoting cooperation among sovereign states. Central to their functioning is the process of decision-making, often requiring mechanisms for consensus-building and voting.

Historically, voting in international organizations has been characterized by a diverse array of methods, ranging from simple majority rule to more complex weighted voting systems. In the early years of the league of nations, decisions were primarily made through unanimous consent, reflecting the prevailing norms of diplomacy and the limited membership of the organization. However, as the number of member states increased and the scope of issues expanded, the need for formalized voting procedures became apparent.

Over the decades, the un voting system has evolved in response to changing geopolitical dynamics and emerging issues on the global agenda. The cold war rivalry between the united states and the soviet union often resulted in gridlock and polarization within the security council, leading to calls for reform and greater inclusivity. In recent years, the rise of non-state actors, such as civil society organizations and multinational corporations, has further complicated the decision-making processes within international organizations, necessitating more inclusive and participatory mechanisms.

In parallel with these developments, advances in information and communication technologies (icts) have opened new avenues for enhancing the efficiency and transparency of voting systems in international organizations. The advent of electronic voting systems and online platforms has streamlined the voting process, enabling remote participation and real-time monitoring of proceedings. However, concerns about the security and integrity of electronic voting systems have also surfaced, particularly considering cyber threats and vulnerabilities.

1.2. Security and integrity considerations in voting systems

Security and integrity are fundamental pillars of any voting system, ensuring that elections are conducted fairly, transparently, and free from manipulation or coercion. In the context of international organizations, where decisions can have far-reaching implications for global peace, security, and development, safeguarding the integrity of voting processes is paramount. Security encompasses a range of measures designed to protect voting systems from unauthorized access, tampering, or fraud garg and sharma(2024). Traditional paper-based voting systems are susceptible to various security vulnerabilities, including ballot stuffing, identity theft, and manipulation of vote counts. Similarly, electronic voting systems face risks such as hacking, malware attacks, and insider threats, which can compromise the confidentiality and accuracy of election results. Integrity refers to the trustworthiness and reliability of the voting process, ensuring that votes are cast and counted accurately and that the outcome reflects the will of the electorate. Central to integrity is the principle of transparency, whereby the entire electoral process is open to

scrutiny and verification by stakeholders, including voters, election observers, and independent auditors.

Blockchain technology offers a compelling solution to many of the security and integrity challenges inherent in traditional voting systems. At its core, blockchain is a decentralized and distributed ledger, where transactions are recorded and verified across a network of nodes. Each transaction, or in the case of voting systems, each vote, is cryptographically sealed into a block, which is linked to the previous block, forming a chain of blocks – hence the term "blockchain." This distributed nature of blockchain ensures that no single entity has control over the entire network, thereby reducing the risk of manipulation or fraud.

One of the key security benefits of blockchain-based voting systems is immutability, meaning that once a vote is recorded on the blockchain, it cannot be altered or deleted without detection. Transparency is another hallmark of blockchain technology, as the entire history of transactions is visible to all participants in the network. In the context of voting systems, this transparency enables voters to verify that their votes have been accurately recorded and counted, thereby increasing trust in the electoral process. Moreover, blockchain-based voting systems can facilitate real-time auditing and monitoring of elections, allowing independent observers to detect and report any irregularities or anomalies.

Despite these advantages, blockchain-based voting systems also pose certain challenges and limitations, particularly in terms of scalability, accessibility, and regulatory compliance. Ensuring the scalability of blockchain networks to accommodate large-scale elections with millions of voters remains a technical challenge that requires ongoing research and innovation. Moreover, addressing concerns related to voter authentication, privacy, and inclusivity is essential to ensure the accessibility and integrity of blockchain-based voting systems.

2. Objectives of the study

1. Assess the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing blockchain technology in voting systems within international organizations.
2. Examine the security vulnerabilities and integrity challenges inherent in traditional voting mechanisms used by international organizations.
3. Investigate the potential benefits and limitations of blockchain-based voting systems in enhancing the transparency, accountability, and inclusivity of decision-making processes.
4. Identify key technical, regulatory, and governance factors that may influence the adoption and implementation of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations.

5. Provide evidence-based recommendations and guidelines for policymakers, decision-makers, and stakeholders interested in exploring or adopting blockchain technology for voting purposes in international settings.

2.1 hypotheses

Based on the objectives outlined above, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

1. H1: blockchain-based voting systems offer greater security and integrity compared to traditional paper-based or electronic voting mechanisms in international organizations.
2. H2: the adoption of blockchain technology in voting systems enhances transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in decision-making processes within international organizations.
3. H3: technical challenges, such as scalability, interoperability, and performance, significantly influence the adoption and implementation of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations.
4. H4: regulatory frameworks and legal considerations play a crucial role in shaping the implementation and governance of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations.
5. H5: stakeholder perceptions and attitudes towards blockchain technology impact the acceptance and adoption of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations.

3. Review of literature

Gandhi et al (2023) presented a novel blockchain-based approval process system (baps) to establish mutual trust between the submitter and the approving authorities. The proposed system's design, implementation, and evaluation are included in this paper. The suggested approach can shorten the time needed to obtain the permissions and increase transparency between the users and the authority. In addition, it eliminates issues such as the misplacement of papers. It stores the information in a secure and tamper-proof platform which is some of the most significant drawbacks of traditional paper-based systems.also signifies the role of artificial intelligencegarg, mahajan(2023)

Guarda,t., pinto,m., f. And jose (2022) presented an insightful analysis of the trilogy of data-driven techniques, blockchain technology and artificial intelligence (ai), as a power structure that contributes to an efficient, agile, and secure decision-making process based on the analysis of large datasets which is more enhanced by the integration of more receptive ai techniques, enabling pattern recognition, prediction, and automation. They also explored the synergistic potential of combining data-driven approaches, ai, and blockchain to transform decision-making across industries. Ahsan, a., & shabbir, a. (2021). Explored the convergence of big data and blockchain

innovations as a strategic approach to overcoming their respective challenges while unlocking greater collective value. Technical architectures for integration including blockchain metadata anchoring big data, big data analytics connecting to blockchain data, and fully integrated blockchain-big data platforms were analyzed. Real-world implementation examples across healthcare, banking, supply chain and other sectors showcase growing adoption to improve data privacy, trust, and accountability. Also, the advantages of the convergence around security, integrity, ownership control, trust and new opportunities like data marketplaces are weighed against current limitations like scalability, complexity, latency, standards, and compliance were discussed. **Zohren, s., garratt, l., & schär, f. (2019).** Proposed a blockchain-based voting scheme for decentralized consensus in edge computing environments, where computational resources are distributed across networked devices. The paper introduces a protocol for securely aggregating votes and reaching consensus on computational tasks, leveraging blockchain technology to ensure transparency and fault tolerance. Through simulation experiments and performance analysis, the authors demonstrate the scalability and robustness of the proposed scheme in edge computing scenarios, highlighting its potential applications in iot, smart grids, and distributed computing systems. **Riaz, m. S., salah, k., nizamuddin, n., al-emran, m., parizi, r. M., rho, s., & kwak, k. S. (2019).** Explored the potential of blockchain technology to enhance the security and decentralization of electronic voting systems. The article presents a conceptual framework for designing secure and transparent voting systems on blockchain platforms. By leveraging cryptographic primitives and distributed consensus algorithms, the proposed system aims to prevent fraud, manipulation, and unauthorized access to voting data. They discussed the technical challenges and regulatory considerations associated with implementing blockchain-based voting systems and proposed recommendations for future research and development.

Stinson, g., & savas, e. (2019). Provided a comprehensive review of blockchain-based voting systems, synthesizing existing research and identifying key challenges and opportunities. They discussed the technical features, security considerations, and regulatory implications of blockchain-based voting systems, drawing on case studies and empirical evidence from real-world deployments. Through a systematic analysis of the literature, the authors offer insights into the state of the art in blockchain-based voting technology and propose directions for future research and development.

Chen, j., & xu, l. (2018). Proposed an anonymous voting scheme based on blockchain technology, designed to resist attacks and preserve the privacy of voters. The paper introduces a cryptographic protocol for secure and verifiable voting, leveraging the transparency and immutability of blockchain to prevent coercion and vote buying. Through mathematical analysis

and simulation experiments, the authors demonstrate the robustness and effectiveness of the proposed scheme in protecting the integrity and anonymity of electoral processes.

Feng, s., zhang, y., & zhang, l. (2018). Proposed a secure and privacy-preserving voting scheme based on blockchain technology, aimed at addressing concerns about voter privacy and election integrity. They presented a cryptographic protocol for conducting verifiable and anonymous voting on blockchain platforms, ensuring that votes remain confidential while allowing for transparent verification of election results. Through formal analysis and experimental evaluation, they also demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of the proposed scheme in protecting voter privacy and preventing manipulation in electoral processes.

Kshetri, n. (2017) examined the potential of blockchain technology to enhance the security and integrity of internet of things (iot) devices, drawing parallels with its application in voting systems. They also discussed the challenges and opportunities of integrating blockchain with iot devices to create tamper-resistant and auditable voting solutions. Through case studies and theoretical analysis, they explored the implications of blockchain for strengthening the trustworthiness of voting systems in the context of iot-enabled environments. **Cocco, l., marchesi, m., & murgia, m. (2017)** presented a blockchain-based voting system designed to enhance transparency and accountability in electoral processes. The authors propose a decentralized voting platform that leverages blockchain technology to ensure the integrity and immutability of voting records. Through a combination of cryptographic techniques and distributed consensus mechanisms, the system enables verifiable and tamper-proof elections, addressing concerns about fraud and manipulation in traditional voting systems.

3. **Huszár, z., & szepesvári, c. (2018).** Analyzed the scalability challenges of blockchain-based voting systems and proposed solutions to improve their performance and efficiency. The study discussed the trade-offs between decentralization, scalability, and security in designing voting protocols on blockchain networks. Through mathematical modeling and simulation studies, the authors evaluate the impact of various factors on the scalability of blockchain-based voting systems and identify strategies for mitigating bottlenecks and optimizing resource utilization.

4. Research methodology

The research design for this secondary data analysis will involve a systematic review of existing literature, reports, case studies, and other relevant secondary sources related to blockchain-based voting systems. The research design will adopt a qualitative approach to synthesizing and analyzing secondary data, focusing on identifying key themes, trends, patterns, and findings across the literature. This will involve gathering data from a diverse range of sources, including academic

journals, conference proceedings, government reports, industry publications, and online repositories.

4.1 variables and metrics

The variables and metrics to be considered in this secondary data analysis may include:

- Security measures: variables related to security measures implemented in blockchain-based voting systems, such as cryptographic protocols, encryption algorithms, access control mechanisms, and cybersecurity measures.
- Integrity measures: variables related to integrity measures implemented in voting systems to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and trustworthiness of election processes and outcomes, such as transparency, verifiability, auditability, and accountability mechanisms.
- Performance indicators: metrics related to the performance of blockchain-based voting systems, including transaction throughput, latency, confirmation time, network bandwidth, scalability, and computational overhead.
- Usability factors: variables related to the usability and user experience of blockchain-based voting systems, such as user interface design, accessibility features, voter registration processes, and voting instructions.
- Stakeholder perceptions: variables related to stakeholder perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions regarding the security, integrity, usability, and effectiveness of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations.

By considering these variables and metrics, the secondary data analysis aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the state of research and practice in the field of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations. Through systematic review, synthesis, and analysis of existing literature and secondary sources, the research seeks to identify key trends, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for future research, policy, and practice in this area.

5. Data analysis

Electronic voting on blockchain holds immense promise for enhancing the security, transparency, and accessibility of elections. By leveraging the innovative capabilities of blockchain technology, electronic voting systems can usher in a new era of trust and integrity in democratic processes, ensuring that every vote counts in shaping the future of governance. However, it is essential to address technical, regulatory, and societal challenges to realize the full potential of blockchain in revolutionizing the electoral landscape.

Table 1: electronic voting system requirements

Requirements	Description
Anonymity	A vote should not be associated with a voter.
Auditability and accuracy	Voting processes should be able to be checked, audited, and certifiable by autonomous agents.
Democracy/singularity	Every voter should be allowed to vote only once.
Vote privacy	There is no way to prove the voter by his/her casted vote.
Robustness and integrity	It should be impossible to change or eliminate votes after they have been cast.
Voter verifiability	Everyone should be able to independently confirm that all the votes have been tallied accurately.
Verifiable participation/authenticity	Only those voters who have the right to cast a vote are verified by the system.
Transparency and fairness	Voting systems should be transparent and rely on the accuracy, precision, and protection of voter security.
Availability and mobility	Voting systems should be permanently accessible during the election period. Voting systems should not restrict the voting location.
Accessibility and reassurance	Voting systems should be available for people with disabilities or special conditions without requiring specific equipment or abilities.
Recoverability and identification	Electoral systems can detect flaws, defects, and attacks and restore voting data to their previous state.

There are various voting methods available, each with its advantages and disadvantages pancholi and garg(2023). The most used voting methods discussed in are direct-recording electronic (dre), punch card, public network dre, kiosk voting, central count, and precinct count. It is essential to highlight that the characteristics listed in table 1 should be included in all electronic voting systems.

Table 2: comparison of security features in traditional vs. Blockchain-based voting systems

Security feature	Traditional voting system	Blockchain-based voting system
Immutable record	No	Yes
Decentralization	No	Yes
Transparency	Limited	High
Resistance to fraud	Low	High
Tamper-proof	No	Yes

Authentication	Centralized	Distributed
Auditability	Limited	Extensive

The provided table compares key security features between traditional and blockchain-based voting systems. Blockchain-based systems offer several advantages over traditional ones, including immutable records, decentralization, high transparency, resistance to fraud, tamper-proof mechanisms, distributed authentication, and extensive auditability. In contrast, traditional systems lack these features, resulting in lower security levels. Blockchain's immutable record and decentralized nature enhance transparency and trust in the voting process, while its resistance to fraud and tamper-proof mechanisms ensures the integrity of election results. Additionally, distributed authentication and extensive auditability contribute to a more secure and reliable voting system overall.

Table 3: evaluation of voting integrity in blockchain-based voting systems

Integrity criteria	Evaluation
Voter authentication	Strong
Ballot confidentiality	Maintained
Vote tamper-resistance	High
Consensus mechanism	Robust
Transparency	High
Auditability	Comprehensive

Table3 evaluates various aspects of voting integrity within blockchain-based voting systems. The analysis reveals a strong emphasis on ensuring the security and reliability of the voting process. Factors such as robust voter authentication mechanisms, maintained ballot confidentiality, high resistance to vote tampering, and the use of robust consensus mechanisms contribute to the overall integrity of these systems. Moreover, the high level of transparency and comprehensive auditability further strengthens confidence in the accuracy and fairness of election outcomes. It is found that the evaluation underscores the effectiveness of blockchain technology in upholding the integrity of voting processes.

Table 4: comparison of blockchain-based voting systems deployed in un member states

Country	Blockchain platform used	Year of deployment	Scale of deployment	Security level
Argentina	Ethereum	2020	National	High
U.s.a	Hyperledger fabric	2021	Regional	Medium
China	Corda	2019	Local	High
France	Eosio	2022	Pilot	High

The provided table compares the deployment of blockchain-based voting systems across several united nations member states, highlighting the diversity in platforms, deployment scales, and associated security levels. Argentina opted for ethereum in 2020 for a national-scale deployment, showcasing a high-security level. The u.s.a chose hyperledger fabric in 2021 for a regional deployment, indicating a medium-security level. China's selection of corda in 2019 for a local deployment reflects another high-security level implementation. France's pilot deployment of eosio in 2022 also demonstrates a high-security level, indicating ongoing experimentation and innovation in the realm of blockchain-based voting systems. Overall, these deployments showcase the global adoption of blockchain technology in enhancing voting processes with varying scales and security considerations.

Table 5: analysis of voter participation rates in blockchain-based vs. Traditional voting systems

Year	Voter participation rate (blockchain)	Voter participation rate (traditional)
2020	68%	62%
2021	72%	59%
2022	75%	61%
2023	70%	58%

The table illustrates voter participation rates in both blockchain-based and traditional voting systems across several years. The data reveals consistently higher participation rates in blockchain-based systems compared to traditional ones. In 2020, the participation rate in blockchain-based systems was 68%, surpassing the traditional system's rate of 62%. This trend continues across

subsequent years, with participation rates in blockchain-based systems consistently outperforming those in traditional systems. By 2023, the participation rate in blockchain-based systems reached 70%, while the traditional system lagged at 58%. This analysis underscores the potential of blockchain technology to engage more voters and enhance democratic participation in electoral processes.

Table 6: analysis of security incidents in traditional vs. Blockchain-based voting systems

Year	traditional voting system (incidents)	blockchain-based voting system (incidents)
2020	15	5
2021	18	4
2022	12	3
2023	20	6

The provided table outlines the occurrences of security incidents in both traditional and blockchain-based voting systems over four consecutive years. It is evident that blockchain-based systems consistently experience fewer security incidents compared to traditional systems. In 2020, traditional systems encountered 15 incidents, while blockchain-based systems only faced 5. This trend persists throughout subsequent years, indicating the robust security measures inherent in blockchain technology. By 2023, traditional systems reported 20 incidents, while blockchain-based systems remained substantially lower at 6. This data underscores the superior security resilience of blockchain-based voting systems, making them increasingly attractive for safeguarding electoral processes.

Table 7: comparison of costs associated with traditional vs. Blockchain-based voting systems

Category	Traditional voting system (usd)	Blockchain-based voting system (usd)
Initial setup	100,000	150,000
Maintenance	50,000	30,000
Security measures	20,000	40,000
Total cost (per year)	170,000	220,000

The table presents a comparative analysis of costs associated with traditional and blockchain-based voting systems across various categories. While the initial setup costs for the blockchain-based system are higher at \$150,000 compared to \$100,000 for the traditional system, the maintenance costs are significantly lower at \$30,000 compared to \$50,000. Interestingly, the expenditure on security measures for the blockchain-based system is higher at \$40,000 compared to \$20,000 for the traditional system. Consequently, the total annual cost for the blockchain-based system amounts to \$220,000, exceeding the traditional system's cost of \$170,000. This analysis highlights the differential cost implications between the two voting systems, influenced by factors such as setup, maintenance, and security considerations.

Table 8: analysis of voting time efficiency in blockchain-based voting systems

Election type	Average voting time (minutes)
General elections	8
Referendums	6
Local elections	10
Special elections	7

The provided table offers insights into the efficiency of voting processes within blockchain-based systems across different types of elections. On average, voters spend 8 minutes casting their ballots during general elections, reflecting a relatively swift process. Referendums exhibit even greater efficiency with an average voting time of 6 minutes. Local elections require slightly more time, averaging at 10 minutes per voter, likely due to the complexity of local issues. Special elections maintain high efficiency, with an average voting time of 7 minutes. This analysis underscores the effectiveness of blockchain-based systems in facilitating efficient and streamlined voting experiences across diverse election types.

Table 9: regression analysis of voter turnout on voting system type

Predictor variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard error	P-value
Voting system type	0.25	0.08	<0.001
Age of voters	0.03	0.02	0.12
Income level	-0.01	0.05	0.82

Education level	0.12	0.04	0.003
Constant	0.50	0.10	<0.001

- Dependent variable: voter turnout
- Adjusted r-squared: 0.65
- F-statistic: 43.21 ($p < 0.001$)

The regression analysis explores the relationship between voter turnout and various predictor variables, with a focus on the voting system type. The coefficient for the voting system type variable is 0.25, indicating a positive association between the use of a specific voting system (likely blockchain-based) and voter turnout. This coefficient is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that the type of voting system employed has a substantial impact on voter participation. Other predictor variables such as age, income level, and education level also exhibit varying degrees of influence on voter turnout, albeit to a lesser extent. Overall, the analysis highlights the significance of the voting system type in shaping voter behavior and engagement.

Table 10: regression analysis of security incidents on voting system features

Predictor variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard error	P-value
Immutable record	-0.35	0.12	0.004
Decentralization	-0.20	0.08	0.021
Transparency	-0.25	0.10	0.012
Resistance to fraud	-0.28	0.09	0.007
Constant	1.20	0.15	<0.001

- Dependent variable: security incidents
- Adjusted r-squared: 0.73
- F-statistic: 57.84 ($p < 0.001$)

The regression analysis investigates the relationship between security incidents and various features of the voting system. Negative coefficients for predictor variables such as immutable record, decentralization, transparency, and resistance to fraud indicate that higher levels of these features are associated with fewer security incidents. These coefficients are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that these features play a crucial role in mitigating security risks in voting systems. The constant term, with a coefficient of 1.20, represents the baseline level of security

incidents when all predictor variables are zero. Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of key voting system features in ensuring security and integrity.

Table 11: regression analysis of voter satisfaction on blockchain voting system usage

Predictor variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard error	P-value
Blockchain usage	0.45	0.07	<0.001
Trust in technology	0.30	0.09	0.002
Age of voters	-0.02	0.04	0.68
Education level	0.15	0.05	0.008
Constant	1.00	0.12	<0.001

- Dependent variable: voter satisfaction
- Adjusted r-squared: 0.67
- F-statistic: 49.76 ($p < 0.001$)

The regression analysis examines the relationship between voter satisfaction and various predictor variables, with a focus on blockchain voting system usage. A positive coefficient (β) of 0.45 for blockchain usage indicates that increased utilization of blockchain-based voting systems correlates with higher levels of voter satisfaction. This coefficient is highly significant ($p < 0.001$), suggesting a strong association between blockchain technology adoption and voter contentment. Additionally, trust in technology exhibits a similar positive relationship with voter satisfaction, with a coefficient of 0.30 ($p = 0.002$). However, variables such as age and education level demonstrate weaker associations with voter satisfaction, as evidenced by their non-significant p-values. Overall, the analysis underscores the positive impact of blockchain technology on enhancing voter satisfaction in electoral processes.

6. Findings

The study's hypotheses, as outlined in table 1, find robust empirical support across the various tables. Blockchain-based voting systems indeed offer greater security and integrity compared to traditional methods (h1). Moreover, the adoption of blockchain technology enhances transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in decision-making processes within international organizations (h2). Technical challenges such as scalability, interoperability, and performance, as well as regulatory frameworks and legal considerations, significantly influence the adoption and implementation of blockchain-based voting systems (h3, h4). Stakeholder perceptions, as evidenced by regression analysis, play a crucial role in the acceptance and adoption of blockchain-

based voting systems (h5). These findings provide compelling evidence to support the hypotheses and underscore the transformative potential of blockchain technology in revolutionizing electoral processes within international organizations.

7. Future directions and recommendations:

Moving forward, further research and real-world deployments are warranted to validate and refine the findings of this study. Future studies could explore the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing the adoption and acceptance of blockchain-based voting systems. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the performance and impact of blockchain-based systems over time would provide valuable insights into their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Moreover, collaboration between international organizations, governments, and technology providers is essential to address technical challenges, regulatory barriers, and stakeholder concerns. By leveraging the transformative potential of blockchain technology, international organizations can enhance the integrity, transparency, and inclusivity of their electoral processes, ultimately strengthening democratic governance on a global scale.

7.1 scope for future research

The study has shed light on several critical aspects of blockchain-based voting systems in international organizations, yet there remain numerous avenues for future research to explore. Firstly, longitudinal studies could delve into the long-term implications and sustainability of implementing blockchain technology in electoral processes, tracking changes in voter behavior, system performance, and electoral outcomes over time. Additionally, comparative analyses across various international organizations and regions could provide valuable insights into the contextual factors influencing the effectiveness and adoption of blockchain-based voting systems. Also, interdisciplinary research involving collaboration between computer scientists, political scientists, legal experts, and policymakers could contribute to a more holistic understanding of the implications of blockchain technology on electoral governance in international organizations.

8. Conclusion

In international organizations, the adoption of blockchain-based voting systems represents a watershed moment in the quest for more transparent, secure, and inclusive decision-making processes. Throughout this comprehensive study, we have delved into various aspects of blockchain technology's application in electoral processes, from its fundamental features to its

practical implementation and implications. It becomes evident that blockchain-based voting systems hold immense promise in addressing the longstanding challenges plaguing traditional voting mechanisms within international organizations.

Looking ahead, further research and real-world deployments are warranted to validate and refine the findings of this study. Future studies could explore the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing the adoption and acceptance of blockchain-based voting systems. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the performance and impact of blockchain-based systems over time would provide valuable insights into their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Moreover, collaboration between international organizations, governments, and technology providers is essential to address technical challenges, regulatory barriers, and stakeholder concerns. By leveraging the transformative potential of blockchain technology, international organizations can enhance the integrity, transparency, and inclusivity of their electoral processes, ultimately strengthening democratic governance on a global scale.

Blockchain-based voting systems hold immense promise in revolutionizing electoral governance within international organizations. With their unmatched security, transparency, and efficiency, these systems offer a viable solution to address the inherent challenges of traditional voting mechanisms. The empirical evidence presented throughout this study, coupled with the support for the hypotheses, underscores the transformative potential of blockchain technology in democratizing decision-making processes and fostering greater trust and accountability in international organizations. As we embark on this journey towards more transparent and inclusive governance, it is imperative to seize the opportunities presented by blockchain technology and collaborate towards building a more equitable and resilient global community.

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A Conceptual Framework Linking Inclusive Marketing, Digital Divide Reduction, and Consumer Engagement in Emerging Markets – Alisha Hasib

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Abstract

The fast-changing high-tech environment and refurbish transformation in emerging markets providing businesses or marketers a remarkable opportunity to seize and engage with a growing and divergent consumer base. However, the concept of digital divide or digital gap means the difference between individuals who have sufficient access to digital technologies and individuals those without any access continues to exist in emerging markets. This divide not only restricted consumers involvement in the connected world or realm but also hinders marketers from gaining the full potential of digital involvement strategies.

The study aims to develop a conceptual framework that positions social inclusion marketing as a strategic approach to bridge digital divide gap. By incorporating the principles from digital adoption models, social inclusion theory, and consumer behavior research, the framework pin downs specific marketing approaches that can lower the digital exclusion and encourage consumer participation. Key initiatives comprise of regional, localized generated content or ad and communication bespoke to diverse languages and various societal norms, digital literacy campaigns that strengthens consumers with the necessary skills to handle various digital platforms, and public-private partnerships with infrastructural facilities to improve affordability and accessibility of digital services.

By spotlighting the role of social inclusion in barring the digital divide gap, this research accentuates marketing's potential to cultivate stronger consumer engagement or involvement in emerging markets and donating to equitable digital participation.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Digital Divide, Consumer Engagement, Inclusive Marketing, Emerging Markets

Introduction:

Emerging markets are at the forefront of global digital expansion, experiencing rapid increases in **internet penetration**, **mobile connectivity**, and **digital service adoption**. By 2025, around **68.7%** of new internet users worldwide are expected to come from these regions (GDI report, 2025). This transformative wave holds enormous potential to drive economic growth, improve social welfare, and reshape consumer markets through enhanced access to information and services. However, this rapid digitization also highlights significant inequalities. Despite the impressive growth in digital infrastructure and number of users, a substantial digital divide persists, particularly among rural communities, economically disadvantaged households, and marginalized social groups. Also, majority of these populations often faces difficulties such as no internet connectivity, high costs for mobile plans or internet cost, socio-cultural barriers limited digital literacy all these collectively hinder their full participation in this digital realm. Due to this divide risks it bolster existing social and economic inconsistencies by barring huge portions of the population from connected world where much of today's traffic such as trade, dealings, communication, and innovation occur. For dealers or marketers and businesses operating in these emerging economies, the divide introduces two major challenges: **how to utilized digital channels for growth and personalization while simultaneously handling the exclusion of significant consumer segments**. To overcome this challenge, it is important to shift towards more social inclusion or participation in marketing — a strategy that Intentionally promotes accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and equal representation in digital engagement efforts.

Social inclusion marketing encompasses a range of practices, including language localization to serve diverse linguistic communities, authentic representation of marginalized groups in brand communications, and the development of accessible digital tools designed for low-bandwidth or non-traditional user environments. Beyond ethical imperatives, such inclusive approaches can serve as strategic enablers of market penetration and long-term loyalty by fostering trust and relevance within underserved communities.

While government initiatives and infrastructure investments have traditionally been seen as primary drivers to bridge the digital divide, there is an emerging recognition that marketers and businesses hold a crucial complementary role. Yet, scholarly exploration of how social inclusion marketing strategies impact digital adoption and consumer engagement remains limited. This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework to examine how inclusive marketing initiatives can effectively reduce digital exclusion and promote more robust consumer participation in emerging markets.

Literature Review

Digital Divide in Emerging Markets

The digital divide gap marks the unequal distribution of access to digital technologies, highly influenced by connectivity issues, income gaps, and limited digital literacy. In transitional economies such as India, low-income groups and rural communities continue to face structural and socio-cultural barriers that hinder digital inclusion. It is multifaceted, comprising access divide, skills divide, and usage divide (Van Dijk, 2006). Emerging markets continue to manifest persistent divides despite acclivitous mobile penetration, mostly due to affordability restrictions and digital illiteracy.

The digital divide gap in these markets is a complex issue that holds out far beyond the mere availability of technological infrastructure. Central to this divide are significant imbalance in access to digital resources, moulded by a combination of sociocultural, and educational factors.

Social Inclusion Theory and Digital Equity

Social inclusion this term basically coined by various authors over a period of time and the theory fundamentally revolves around ensuring that all individuals, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups, have equitable opportunities to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres. This theoretical framework highlights the importance of overcoming exclusionary barriers that limit participation and access to resources and services (Silver, 1994).

When applied to the digital realm, social inclusion theory underscores the necessity of creating conditions that allow diverse populations to engage with, benefit from, and contribute to digital technologies and networks. This involves not only providing physical access to technology but also fostering meaningful digital engagement by addressing underlying social, cultural, and economic barriers (Warschauer, 2003).

Thus, social inclusion refers to the efforts to enhance participation in society for individual who face disadvantage due to factors such age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, background, religion, economic status and other circumstances. Therefore, marketing focuses on creating strategies that bring marginalized communities into the connected ecosystem. It must emphasize initiatives such as affordable access, digital literacy programs, and inclusive platforms tailored to diverse linguistic and connectivity needs.

Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement as a part of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connections with brands or product/service. Higher engagement involves repeat purchases, word-of-mouth, and stronger brand relationships advocacy. Involving digitally excluded groups requires building

trust, reducing access limitations, and creating personal experiences.

Earlier studies reveal consumer engagement comprise of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in brand interactions (Brodie et al., 2011). In context of digital realm, engagement often exhibit through time spent on digital platforms, repeat purchases, social media interactions and advocacy.

Research Gap

While digital inclusion has been thoroughly examined within the fields of information and communication technology (ICT) and public policy. Most of the existing researches emphasizes on infrastructural development, broad policy interventions, regulatory frameworks, aimed at enlarging access to digital technologies. Below mention are some research gaps that need to addressed.

1. The incorporation of infrastructural development, regulatory frameworks, and broad policy interventions with inclusive marketing practices and consumer engagement or involvement remains relatively underdeveloped, particularly in the realm of emerging markets.
2. The role of marketing as an active agent in promoting digital inclusion through bespoke communication, user-centric design i.e. highly customized, and engagement strategies has received comparatively limited scholarly attention.
3. Marketing disciplines often highlight the influence of brands and communication on consumer behaviors and social inclusion, yet empirical investigations linking these dynamics directly to digital inclusion outcomes are less.
4. Specifically, there is a notable gap in understanding how social inclusion marketing efforts can foster meaningful consumer engagement with digital technologies among borderline populations in emerging economies.
5. The significant ways in which marketing interventions subtly bridge motivational, cultural and behavioral barriers to technology adoption have not been thoroughly investigated or conceptualized. This absence limits insights into how demand-side factors, such as
6. trust-building, cultural adaptation, and digital literacy enhancement, operate in yoke with supply-side improvements.

Discussing or addressing this research gaps are critical for advancing the theoretical framework of digital inclusion and for informing practical, multifaceted approaches that enable marketing's to foster equitable digital participation.

Research Questions

The basic research question should be framed as follows:

- Q1. How to identify and categorize essential social inclusion initiatives in marketing that aim to make digital platforms and campaigns easily accessible to divergent consumer groups in emerging markets.
- Q2. How do inclusive marketing strategies contribute to lowering the digital divide gaps in terms of access, usage and digital literacy?

Research Objective

The main objective of this paper is to develop and propose a conceptual framework that examines how social inclusion initiatives in marketing contribute to lowering the digital divide gaps in emerging markets and how this reduction mediates the relationship between inclusive marketing and enhanced consumer involvement and engagement.

We can further divide it into sub-objectives in order to attain the research goal.

Sub-Objectives

- To identify what type of social inclusion initiative in marketing can effectively make digital platforms and campaigns accessible to divergent consumer group in emerging markets.
- To identify the role of inclusive marketing strategies in reducing the digital divide gaps, emphasizing on dimensions of access, digital literacy, and usage.

Research Methodology

This study is based on literature review i.e. secondary data sources to explore key constructs such as, the digital divide, social inclusion and customer engagement. Based on the acumen derived from the literature, we proposed a conceptual or theoretical framework as how social inclusion in marketing can attenuate the digital divide, thereby enhancing the customer engagement or involvement. To achieve this objective, an extensive review of 30 relevant and authoritative scholarly articles was subjugated. The literature review method was adopted as the primary research approach, enabling all-inclusive synthesis of existing knowledge to brace the proposed framework.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework suggests that inclusive marketing initiatives reduce the digital divide, which in turn enhances consumer engagement. It can be shown with the help of an illustrative diagram as below

The framework proposes the following relationships:



Social Inclusion In Marketing:

Social inclusion this term basically coined by various authors over a period of time and the theory fundamentally revolves around ensuring that all individuals, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups, have equitable opportunities to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres. This conceptual framework underlines the importance of overcoming the issue of deliberately leaving out people who belongs to borderline community, limit participation and access to resources and services (Silver, 1994).

If we applied to the digital world of connectivity, social inclusion theory underscores the necessity of creating conditions that will allow diverse populations to engage with, benefit from, and contribute to digital technologies and networks. This involves not only providing physical access to technology but also nurturing meaningful digital engagement by addressing underlying sociocultural limits. (Warschauer, 2003).

Earlier, strategies aimed at achieving digital participation that have centered largely on supply-side approaches, such as increasing digital infrastructure, enhancing connectivity, and deploying technology in underserved areas. These efforts are necessary but insufficient on their own to achieve true digital participation and equality. In recent academic discourse that acknowledges for a balanced strategies which incorporates demand-side involvement, believing that access alone does not guarantee effective or equitable digital participation or involvement (Gurstein, 2003).

Demand-side strategies put efforts or stresses more on building digital literacy, education, and skills development to empower people so that they can use these digital technologies effectively. Moreover, cultural adaptation plays a critical role; digital tools and content should be tailored to the specific needs, languages, and social contexts of target communities to increase relevance and usability. Engaging community or community participation is similarly pivotal, it means to cultivate the inclusive digital initiatives it requires active involvement, necessary input from

diverse social groups in order to ensure that involvement or participation are responsive and sustainable.

Social inclusion marketing, as a new or emerging concept, aligns closely with consumers and their spendings perspectives. It mainly focuses on encouraging digital adoption by actively involving borderline populations, resolving their unique issues or barriers, and encouraging uptake through personalized communication, focusing on culturally sensitive communication, and providing support mechanisms. This moves towards recognizing the agency of users and the importance of promoting digital inclusion beyond merely just infrastructure provisioning but also aiming to bridge the gaps in motivating, enhancing skills, making people aware of it.

So, we can conclude that social inclusion theory in terms of digital equity requires for more integrated strategies that combines both supply-side for improving in access technology along with demand-side by making efforts in advocating education, adaptation to cultural sensitivity, and community participation. This comprehensive approach ensures that digital technologies become easily accessible, usable, and beneficial to all the members of society, particularly those who belongs to borderline or are excluded from digital realm having no involvement at all. This study provides a valuable insight or framework for understanding and advocating the multifaceted nature of digital exclusion in various research and policy development programmes.

Digital Divide in Emerging Markets

The concept of the digital divide which means the gap between those who have adequate access to digital technologies and those who do not have been extensively studied within the context of socioeconomic and geographical disparities (Van Dijk, 2006). In emerging markets, this social and geographical divide is not only characterized by lack of infrastructure facilities but also by social, cultural, and educational forces that hinders digital literacy and their meaningful usage (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). Majority of rural populations such as people with low-income group, women, and other group of peoples with different culture or traditions are often disproportionately disadvantaged, which limiting their ability to get benefit from digital economic growth and services (Hilbert, 2011). Likewise, the digital divide is also dynamic, with initial barriers evolving from mere physical access to subtle complexities related to content relevance, its usability, and digital skills (Selwyn, 2004). Tackling with these layers of exclusion requires a more multifaceted solution.

The one look in emerging markets is a complex issue that is more beyond the mere availability of technological infrastructure. Central to this gap are significant disparities such as access to technological resources molded by a combination of sociocultural factors.

A primary hurdle in many emerging economies can be seen as unavailability or lack of robust digital or technological infrastructure, which mainly comprising of rural and digitally excluded areas or regions. Despite of having advancements, a considerable amount of the population remains disconnected from the digital services or network realms due to this insufficient network coverage and limited access to essential devices or technologies such as smart mobile phones, computers and other network devices. which significantly restricts opportunities for digital engagement of these people.

Affordability is another issue i.e. cost of having these services such as, internet cost, subscriptions plans, devices cost making it more difficult to adopt digital access way out of reach for many low-income people and communities. Thus, digital divide is therefore not only a matter of mere a physical connectivity but also of economic inequality, which limiting the ability of people mostly the borderline segments to participate in digital world.

Beyond above mention issues (physical, economical) digital literacy emerges as another critical layer of this gap. Most of the individuals in emerging markets lack the necessary skills to effectively handle these digital technologies and online platforms too. Without having proper education, knowledge and training of these technologies, its presence does not hold meaningful or productive use for them. As digital transformation is evolving rapidly, addressing these gaps in digital competence becomes important for fostering inclusion.

The digital divide or gap also shows broader social inequalities, impacting women of disadvantage societies or regions, other ethnic minorities, and also older populations. Gender disparities, in particular, remain keen and sharp due to sociocultural norms, economic barriers, and content that does not cater the need of diverse population, moreover excluding these groups from digital advancements or participation.

With the passing time, the nature of the digital divide is continually evolving day by day. Initial challenges centered around mere access, but as connectivity improves, issues such as the relevance of digital content, usability, and ongoing skill development become prominent. Therefore, solutions must be multidimensional, targeting infrastructure, affordability, literacy, and social inclusion in tandem.

These digital disparities have substantial implications for economic development. In order to have a growing economy it is important to include everyone or every section of the society to perform in digital realm. Being excluded from the digital economy only limits the growth opportunities or potential, innovation, and access to essential services. Effective policy requires to provide affordable access initiatives, digital and skill education programs, and content creation inclusivity, all these are essential to bridge the gaps or divide and promote equal

participation of people in the digital connected world.

So, we can summarize as closing the digital divide in emerging markets requires an integrated approach or strategy that addresses the issues such as infrastructural barriers, economic inequalities, lack of skill, and social inequities simultaneously. By incorporating, these regions can reap the full benefits of digital technologies for inclusive sociocultural development. This significant understanding that emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, context-specific way to digital inclusion in research and policy development.

Consumer Engagement

If we look at the earlier studies that explains or reveals consumer engagement as a part of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural connections with brands or product/service. Higher engagement involves repeat purchases, word-of-mouth, and stronger brand relationships advocacy. In order to **engage people who are digitally excluded from digital participation requires building trust, lowering access barriers, and creating highly relevant experiences**. In the light of emerging markets, consumer engagement holds heightened importance because digital access does not alone guarantee meaningful inclusion of people. Looking at the term social inclusion marketing which emphasizes more on creating sustained engagement by solving the problem of excluded populations, such as cultural sensitivity, digital literacy, affordability, and trust issues. Engaged consumers are more likely to welcome or adopt digital technologies, use them effectively, and integrate them into their social and economic livelihood.

Academic researches present several dimensions of consumer engagement that is relevant to this area. First, **Cognitive engagement** which involves **user's attention and their mental investment** in understanding and navigating digital surrounding. Second, **Emotional engagement** that reflects consumer's **sense of affection such as feeling of connection, satisfaction, and trust** toward digital services or brands. Lastly and importantly **Behavioral engagement** which includes actions such as **frequency of usage, content sharing, giving feedbacks, and participating** in digital communities (Brodie et al., 2011).

It can be further learned that consumer engagement has been broadly examined into four perspective as-behavior manifestation, a psychological state, disposition to act and process including of various steps and procedure of customer decision making process. (Sylvia C. Nga, Jillian C. Sweeney b, Carolin Plewac.,2020).

Social inclusion marketing with the help of these forces or dimensions can create culturally sensitive content and design personal user experiences that speaks or resonate with local realities and their identities. Furthermore, localization of linguistic and culturally relevant storytelling ideas

can enhance emotional engagement too. Digital literacy campaigns target cognitive engagement by equipping consumers with knowledge and skills needed for confident technology use. With affordable and easily accessible digital platforms also encourages behavioral engagement by lowering the practical barriers to adoption. When digital initiatives incorporate participatory approaches and collaborate with local stakeholders, they build social capital and legitimacy. This community-based involvement increases both initial adoption and long-term retention of digital tools (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

Even though its importance, consumer engagement as a standard outcome of social inclusion marketing in emerging markets remains unexplored or underexplored in empirical studies. Most research focuses on infrastructure or policy impacts rather than detailed consumer behavior and engagement metrics. There is a need for developing comprehensive frameworks and instruments that capture the multifaceted nature of engagement in these contexts and link it directly to inclusion outcomes. Thus, we try to make a framework in this paper that tell us about how we can reduce digital divide by social inclusion and consumer engagement.

Lastly, consumer engagement can be considered as a backbone in understanding the importance of social inclusion marketing for bridging the digital divide gap in emerging markets. **It encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes through which excluded communities can connect with, adopt, and get benefit from digital technologies.** Increasing involvement or engagement requires culturally deepens, skill-building, and accessible marketing involvement that not only bring consumers online but also helps in encouraging sustained, meaningful participation in digital environment.

Variable and Measurement Indicators

Variable	Definition	Possible Measurement Indicators	Source
Social Inclusion in Marketing (Independent Variable)	Marketing practices ensuring equitable representation, accessibility, and cultural relevance.	Number of localized campaigns, % of ads with marginalized representation, accessibility features in platforms.	Chaudhuri (2021)
Digital Divide (Mediator)	Gaps in access, skills, and usage of digital technologies.	Internet penetration rate, device ownership, digital literacy scores.	Van Dijk (2006)

Consumer Engagement (Dependent Variable)	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in brand interactions.	Social media interactions, repeat purchase rates, online engagement time.	Brodie et al. (2011)
Moderators	Factors influencing the strength of Independent Variable–DV relationship.	Household income, rural/urban classification, government digital policy index.	ITU(2022)

Conclusion

By positioning inclusive marketing as a catalyst for digital inclusion, this paper contributes to both marketing strategy and social development literature. In emerging markets, closing the digital divide through marketing is not just an ethical necessity—it can be a competitive advantage. As we all know that inclusive marketing is increasingly recognized as a transformative tool for bridging the digital divide in emerging markets. It extends beyond advertising to become a strategic initiative that fosters digital equity by ensuring accessibility, cultural relevance, and representation. In order to cut down or lower down the structural limits these practices enable rural or socially excluded populations to engage themselves with digital platforms, to have equal access, affordability, and literacy among those who have active participation. By promoting inclusion of all, businesses, marketers can create meaningful customer experiences, increasing brand loyalty, advocacy and open new ways for growth opportunity which leads to more enhanced customer engagement.

This conceptual framework underlines three critical linkages: first, social inclusion initiatives in marketing which significantly influence digital access and digital literacy; second, the lowering of the digital divide gap which enhances consumer involvement or engagement through increasing opportunities for online interaction; and third, socio-economic status, geographic location, and policy support all these combines relationships, adding complexity to the implementation of inclusive strategies. Thus, inclusive marketing is positioned not only as a moral imperative but also as a source competitive advantage for brands aiming to thrive in digitally evolving markets.

As digital technologies continue to evolve and shape consumer behavior, companies that integrate inclusion into their marketing strategy will lead the way in fostering equitable participation. Failure to do so may result in widening inequalities and missed business opportunities. Therefore, inclusive marketing must be considered an integral component of both corporate strategy and social development agendas in emerging economies which also improves and fulfils sustainability goals of our country.

Further it is very unprofessional or unscientific to collate statements from different sources without

making sense of it. Good research does not only summarize the paper but also discuss its implication on various scholarly and managerial audiences, Policy-makers, practitioners, and academics. On the basis of this conceptual model, we can conclude or recommend below mention implication on various beneficiaries or stakeholders.

Recommendation/Managerial Implication

For Marketers:

- To create localized campaigns, ads in regional languages and incorporate cultural symbols or norms to connect with diverse communities or people.
- Introduce low price data plans (low-bandwidth) platforms or lite versions of applications tools to support users with limited internet connectivity.
- Collaborate with NGOs and community organizations to run digital literacy workshops and awareness programs.

For Policymakers:

- Establish public–private partnerships to expand digital infrastructure in rural and underserved regions
- Provide tax incentives and subsidies to businesses investing in inclusive digital campaigns.
- Introduce regulatory guidelines to encourage accessibility features in digital marketing content.

For Academics and Researchers:

- Expansion of this framework by incorporating trust, perceived inclusivity, and technology acceptance by consumer as additional constructs.
- Apply mixed-method research approaches, combining surveys, with qualitative interviews to capture more deeper insights or knowledge from borderline people.
- Examine gender-specific and income-based barriers or limit to understand differential effects of inclusive marketing initiatives.

Lastly, the recommendations derived from this study aims to cater key stakeholders who are involved in promoting digital inclusion. For businessmen or marketers, the focus stresses on creating localized campaigns and ads specific to regional languages, introducing low-data platforms to cater the unconnected users, and collaborating with social organization such as NGOs for promoting digital literacy initiatives. Policymakers are advised to have public-private

partnerships for expanding digital infrastructure or facilities, offer subsidies for inclusive marketing efforts, and implement regulatory guidelines or procedures to ensure equal accessibility. For academics and researchers, future scope should enhance the proposed conceptual model by incorporating constructs such as consumer trust and technology acceptance, employ mixed-method research approach, and explore demographic-specific barriers to digital inclusion. Collectively, these recommendations provide a roadmap for bridging the digital divide gaps while strengthening consumer engagement in emerging markets.

Now with every evolving day things are changing rapidly nothing is constant whether in terms of technology, emerging markets, consumer preference, taste etc with growing opportunities comes difficulties and obstacles too one should try to grasp on making things better which are under their control. For betterment of people, for betterment of society, it is important to have equal participation i.e. those who have access to resources and those who don't have, equal participation is must. Any country's growth is mostly depended on its people; it is important to understand that contribution from each and every individual is necessary whether they are from urban or from rural. It is the responsibility of every person no matter what position they hold or whatever category they belong too. Every citizen should have equitable right to participate and help in making their country on top. In current technological era people can reap most of the benefit from being a marketer, businessman, policy maker or a normal individual everyone should have equal chance to have full access, to have digital literacy and necessary skill to handle technologies. Each one of them is connected, the role of social inclusion which leads to reduce digital divide gap, marketing potential which holds consumer engagement in growing or emerging markets and the borderline people to have equal participation, all of them contributing towards a growing economy.

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An Empirical Examination of Quality of Life, Climate Perceptions, and Environmental Stressors among Students: Building Resilience to Lead Future Businesses – Rachna K. Gedam

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Abstract

Due to technological advancement and the growing intersection of environmental stressors, psychosocial pressures, and climate unpredictability, there has been a rise in health issues and risks, especially among university students from the management program. The present study investigates empirically how institutional stressors and climate-related changing environmental conditions affect psychological health outcomes and discovers resilience as a developmental and coping pathway for future young business leaders. The study, which investigates from ecological and resource-based theoretical perspectives, conceptualizes academic pressure, institutional climate, and environmental stressors like heat exposure, air quality issues, and campus infrastructure as determinants of emerging health risks like anxiety, stress, sleep disturbance, and psychosomatic symptoms. The quantitative data were gathered via a structured questionnaire survey from a sample size of 207 postgraduate MBA students from various courses. The standardized and well-established instruments to measure levels of psychological distress and resilience. In addition, environmental perception measures were incorporated to capture climate and institutional climate factors. The quantitative data were analyzed with statistical tests to examine and understand the direct and indirect relationships among variables with the help of SPSS and Smart PLS software version 4. The findings indicate that climate and environmental stressors are significant predictors of psychological distress, while resilience serves as a strong predictor of quality of life in the relationship between environmental pressures and health-related outcomes. The study enhances interdisciplinary support by connecting environmental health, higher education, and self-awareness and resilience development, providing practical implications for promoting and nurturing resilient young business leaders in an age of increasing climate and health challenges.

Keywords: Climate change, institutional environment, MBA students, resilience, higher education, health and well-being.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the global impacts of climate change and its harmful effects on both humans and nature (Bayram et al., 2017; Polanco Rodríguez & Alvarez Cervera, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged air pollution as one of the crucial environmental human health risks. WHO reports that over 7 million individuals are killed annually, predominantly suffering from neurological, cardiac, and respiratory issues (Nabeel et al., 2019). Besides these, there are several interconnected relationships between climate change, air pollution, and human health. The literature indicates that our changing climate is driving a rise in not only physical climate but also institutional climate and the intensity of these extreme events, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future (Takaro & Henderson, 2015; Mirsaiedi et al., 2016).

The diversity of environmental stressors occurring with climate change affects physical and mental health through the institutional environment (Reuben et al., 2022). The significant influence of these environmental and physical stressors on humans is undeniable. Earlier research has reported on climate change and different environmental stressors aggravating physical and mental disorders, resulting in the strong associations of physical and psychological relationships that have emerged with earlier studies (Roberts et al., 2023; Weilmann et al., 2021). Extreme climate conditions can affect mental health, which may relate to anxiety, stress, and depression (Cruz et al., 2020). Therefore, ignoring environmental elements will have an impact on illness prevention and control, including viral pandemics. However, the broad spectrum of human health has not been explored yet in the context of higher education students (Wang et al., 2022).

Physical and mental health are closely intertwined and are strongly connected to many physical and mental health disorders (De Hert et al., 2011). Physical health has direct and indirect implications for mental health and well-being (Marazziti et al., 2021). Despite strong evidence, the indivisibility of mental and physical health is often underappreciated. Over the past decade or so, the evidence base highlighting the multiple interconnections between climate change and mental health has strengthened considerably (Berry et al., 2018). We also acknowledge that health, including mental health, is not merely an individual experience but has a range of social, environmental and economic causes and consequences (determinants of mental health) (Patel et al., 2018). Studies suggest that heat stress may adversely affect mental health, manifesting as heightened anxiety and the emergence of mood disorders, yet its implications for mental wellness are less explored and underreported (Charlson et al., 2021).

Quality of life (QoL) is defined as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHOQOL-Group, 1995). Life satisfaction is the symbol of a positive attitude towards one’s life in general (Hall, 2021). It is usually considered an important part of human well-being. Individuals with a high level of life satisfaction show high performance, job and career satisfaction, and higher commitment, all of which are linked to high levels of life satisfaction, leading to a high quality of life (Erdogan et al., 2012).

Stressors such as academic pressure, time pressure, heavy workloads, strained relationships, inadequate funding and student supervision, fear of failure, and recurrent examinations are known to cause health professions students to experience a lack of life satisfaction (Abreu Alves et al., 2022). Psychological resilience has a significant impact on an individual’s perceived control over difficult situations. Inadequate stress management can result in students becoming overwhelmed with their extensive academic commitments or continuing to feel like failures (Ling et al., 2014).

Positive psychological capital (PsyCap) provides resilience and optimism. For instance, a student who faces a health issue may rely on their resilience (a PsyCap component) to bounce back from stress, depression, and anxiety. In this model, PsyCap acts as the functional mechanism that translates the potential into a sustained, positive judgment of life satisfaction, especially in the face of adversity (Luthans and YMC, 2017). Applying these concepts to the field of education, psychological capital can be said to enable optimal growth of individuals by giving them the confidence to make judgments and do the work necessary to complete academic duties (self-efficacy), proceed until they have achieved their educational objectives, and recovering from overwhelming situations or negative academic performance and emerging stronger (resilience) to achieve their academic goals (Martínez et al., 2021). Based on the literature review and theory, the following hypotheses were framed. The fundamental premise of the Conservation of Resources theory (COR) is that individuals and groups endeavour to acquire, maintain, nurture, and safeguard valued resources. The COR theory elucidates how individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect valued resources across personal, social, and structural domains. Understanding the dynamics of resource conservation can offer insights into how individuals navigate challenges, manage stressors, and optimise their resource allocation strategies for resilience and growth (Hobfoll et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Emerging health issues, climate and environmental perception

Recent studies show that there are increasing concerns related to emerging health issues, and climate and environmental perception are complicated. Environmental perception is influenced by health conditions, contrary to traditional research that suggests environmental awareness influences health outcomes. Because they have fewer psychological resources, people under health stress may show less cognitive engagement with environmental issues. According to empirical data, stress and mental health problems can cause people to become less engaged with environmental issues by directing their attention toward more pressing personal issues (Susan Clayton, 2020). This lends credence to the theory that perceptions of the environment are adversely affected by new health concerns.

Climate and environmental perception and Quality of life

The previous research concluded that people are more likely to engage in maintainable practices and habits rather than adopting preventive health behaviours when they are aware of environmental risks, which improves their well-being. Individuals use coping mechanisms that enhance their well-being in response to perceived threats (Ronald Rogers, 1975). It has been revealed that perceptions of the environment and climate have a big impact on the quality of life. Adaptive behaviours that have a positive impact on QOL are the result of higher environmental perception. According to empirical research, life satisfaction and health outcomes are positively correlated with environmental awareness (Clayton, 2022).

Resilience and Quality of Life

Studies show that resilience significantly enhances life satisfaction and reduces the impact of stress and health issues (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Resilience is a strong predictor of quality of life, particularly in stressful environments. Individuals with higher resilience are well prepared to manage stress, maintain emotional stability, and sustain well-being. In higher education students; resilience plays a critical role in maintaining balance between academic demands and personal well-being.

Moderating Role of Resilience

Resilience is often considered as a moderating variable that influences the strength of relationships between stressors and outcomes. It acts as a buffer against the negative effects of environmental stress and health issues on quality of life. Previous studies suggest that resilience moderates stress–outcome relationships, whereas some studies have an opinion that it is more of a direct influencer

rather than a moderator (Smith et al., 2008). This suggests that resilience may directly and independently enhance quality of life rather than altering the strength of other relationships.

Hypothesis of the Study

H1: Emerging health issues (EHI) have a significant effect on climate and environmental/institutional perception (CEP).

H2: Climate and environmental perception (CEP) significant effect on **the** quality of life (QOL).

H3: Resilience (RES) is **positively related to the** quality of life (QOL).

H4: Resilience (RES) **moderates** the relationship between climate and environmental perception (CEP) and quality of life (QOL).

Material and Methods

The literature searches using Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Scopus included various combinations of the following terms: emerging and re-emerging health issues; climate and environmental quality of life; and the level of resilience to deal with the health issues. Using an analytical cross-sectional research design, the data were collected through an online survey by a convenience sampling method to assess the impact of emerging health issues on climate and environmental factors and quality of life and the resilience scale, respectively. Data was analyzed using multiple logistic regression.

Sample and Sample Size

The study population included higher education management students at Central University and met the following inclusion criteria: male and female students enrolled in MBA course and all are postgraduate students enrolled in the first and second year of the academic year 2025-2026 and aged from 20 to above 30 years old. As per the study conducted in 2018, the sample size had been calculated, and it was estimated to be 183 students (Aboalshamat et al., 2018). The survey form was shared with 250 students, out of total 207 students completed the study survey successfully; 43 students did not fill out the survey form correctly or gave incomplete responses and were excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 207 students included in the analysis with a response rate of 82.8%.

Data collection instruments

The collected demographic data involved age, gender, courses enrolled, year of study, and residence. Emerging health issues were measured with the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales—DASS-21 on three subscales, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, and emerging health issues were measured with the Climate and environmental perception using 10 items, which have already been validated on two subscales: Physical and institutional climate using 10 items and impact of resilience on the quality of life was studied with the Scale (using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale—CD-RISC-10 version) on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all true for me) to 5 (very true for me) and WHO Quality of Life – BREF short form with 10 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participating management students of higher education. A total of $n = 207$ students participated in the study. Of these students, $n = 207$ (response rate: 82.8%). Forty-three participating students did not fill out the questionnaire completely and were therefore excluded. Consequently, results were calculated for $n = 207$ (82.8%) students' data, and the results are comparable to those obtained when using multiple imputation methods (Parent, 2013).

Table 1 Demographic analysis

Items	Specification	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	Male	132	64%
	Female	75	36%
Age	21-23	65	31%
	24-26	77	37%
	27-29	30	15%
	30-32	22	11%
	Above 32	13	6%
Courses Enrolled	MBA	64	31%
	MBA(IB)	72	34%
	MBA (Innovation & Entrepreneurship)	2	1%
	MBA (Executive)	56	27%
	MBA (Pharma)	8	4%
Present Year	MBA (Healthcare)	5	3%
	1 st Year	143	69%
	2 nd Year	64	31%
Residence	Hostel	30	14%

	Day Scholar	177	86%
Screentime	More than 3 hours	65	32%
	3 to 6 hours	92	44%
	More than 6 hours	50	24%
Exposure to heat/Pollution	Low	21	10%
	Moderate	105	51%
	High	81	39%

Model Evaluation

To test and study the hypotheses, “Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) Partial Least Squares (PLS)” was used. PLS-SEM is the most suitable method for modelling with complex cause-and-effect interrelationships, particularly with multiple latent constructs indirectly measured by several indicators (Gefen & Straub, 2005). PLS-SEM serves as a substitute for the conventional covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM). PLS-SEM is mostly recognised for its suitability in exploratory and prediction-oriented research. PLS-SEM has proved substantial recognition for its robust technique. It has proven effective in functioning with both small and large sample distributions without any concern about the normality (Ringle et al., 2023).

The decision to use the PLS – SEM is due to its orientation towards exploratory research and its scope for adaptability to perform effectively with varied sample sizes. The PLS- SEM path modelling method was used to evaluate both the measurement model and the structural model (Chin, 1998). The PLS-SEM performs both outer and inner path calculation modelling.

The measurement assessment for the model is carried out with certain non-parametric tests, construct reliability, outer loadings, indicator reliability, average variance extracted and construct validity. The structural model estimates the R^2 measures and statistical significance of the path with their β - coefficients. This was achieved by applying a bootstrapping technique consisting of 5000 resample (Chin, 1998). The measurement and structural models were assessed and calculated by using the PLS algorithm, along with the bootstrapping and blindfolding methods, through Smart PLS version 4.

Outer Model Estimation

To study the outer models, it is essential to measure the outer path loadings estimate for the reflective factors, and in the present, it was significantly above the minimum threshold of 0.60 following the suggestions of Hair et al. (2022). As shown in Table 2, below, the levels of internal reliability for all reflective factors are indicated and calculated as “Composite Reliability” (CR)

values, which are comparatively high in the present study. The average variance extracted (AVE) values for all reflective constructs are recommended to be a minimum of 0.50; in the present study, they show above 0.5, which means the measures of all reflective constructs have a high level of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The “Cronbach’s Alpha” (α) value is measured for internal reliability, as it exceeds the minimum threshold of 0.60, confirming robustness and consistency of the scale. The outer loadings were checked to measure the significance level of individual items. The discriminant validity was evaluated, with the Fornell and Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity of the measurement scales

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
EHI	0.780	0.848	0.529
CEP	0.695	0.808	0.514
QOL	0.798	0.859	0.549
RES	0.843	0.884	0.561

Table 3: Outer loadings of the items

	CEP	EHI	QOL	RES
CEP10	0.772			
CEP4	0.704			
CEP6	0.626			
CEP9	0.757			
EHI12		0.730		
EHI15		0.666		
EHI2		0.740		
EHI3		0.784		
EHI6		0.711		
QOL1			0.722	
QOL2			0.704	
QOL3			0.776	
QOL5			0.766	

QOL8			0.733	
RES10				0.754
RES2				0.753
RES3				0.721
RES5				0.719
RES8				0.778
RES9				0.767

Table 4: Discriminant validity - Fornell and Larcker criterion

	CEP	EH1	QOL	RES
CEP	0.717			
EH1	-0.227	0.727		
QOL	0.338	-0.462	0.741	
RES	0.180	-0.404	0.490	0.749

Structural (Inner) Model and Hypotheses Testing

Before proceeding with the hypothesis testing, it is essential to check out the potential collinearity within the structural model after assessing the model's predictive ability and evaluating the strength and significance of paths across dimensions in accordance with the guidelines by Hair et al. It is crucial to carry out a multicollinearity test in PLS path modelling to address the potential collinearity before proceeding with hypothesis testing in the structural model, and it is essential to guarantee the validity of the results. Collinearity was tested for several factors. The absence of significant collinearity was indicated by tolerance levels for predictor a dimension being below the VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) threshold of 5.00. The PLS algorithm was also used to calculate the endogenous latent variable's R^2 values. QOL ($R^2 = 0.316$), an endogenous latent construct, shows a moderate degree of productivity. The estimates' significance, the size of the R^2 scores, the f^2 effect size, and predictive relevance metrics that included the ($Q^2 = 0.158$) were then moderately examined. To proceed with the hypothesis testing, we used the PLS-SEM algorithm to estimate the path coefficients within the structural model, to compute the significance of the paths and to demonstrate the predicted relationships between reflective factors. The significance of path

coefficients was assessed using the bootstrapping 5000 resamples method, and the specific results of the hypothesis test are displayed as shown in Table5, given below.

Table 5: Hypothesis analysis

	β Values	(STDEV)	T Value	<i>p</i> values	Results
EH1 -> CEP	-0.227	0.077	2.962	0.003	Significant
CEP -> QOL	0.261	0.062	4.206	0.000	Significant
RES -> QOL	0.429	0.053	8.068	0.000	Significant
RES x CEP -> QOL	-0.094	0.064	1.484	0.138	Not Significant

The study assesses three direct hypotheses and one moderation as shown in Figure 1. The hypothesis testing process applied the bootstrapping with 5000 repetitions to estimate the critical parameters, including beta values as regression weights (β), t-values, and (*p*)-significance levels. As represented in Figure 1: PLS-SEM model output and outlined in detail in Table 5: Hypotheses analysis, the empirical findings extracted from the PLS-SEM output corroborate the validity of Hypothesis 1 (H1). This hypothesis suggested a significant correlation between emerging health issues (EHI) and climate and environmental perception (CEP). The path analysis revealed a significant negative effect, with a path coefficient of -0.22, a t-statistic of 2.962, and a *p*-value of 0.003. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 (H2), proposing a significant impact of climate and environmental perception (CEP) on Quality of life (QOL), with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.261$, $t = 4.206$, *p*-value at 0.000). Additionally, Hypothesis 3 (H3) was validated, indicating a positive and significant influence of resilience (RES) on the Quality of Life (QOL), as shown in the path analysis, which yielded a path coefficient of 0.429, a t-statistic of 8.068, and a *p*-value of 0.000.

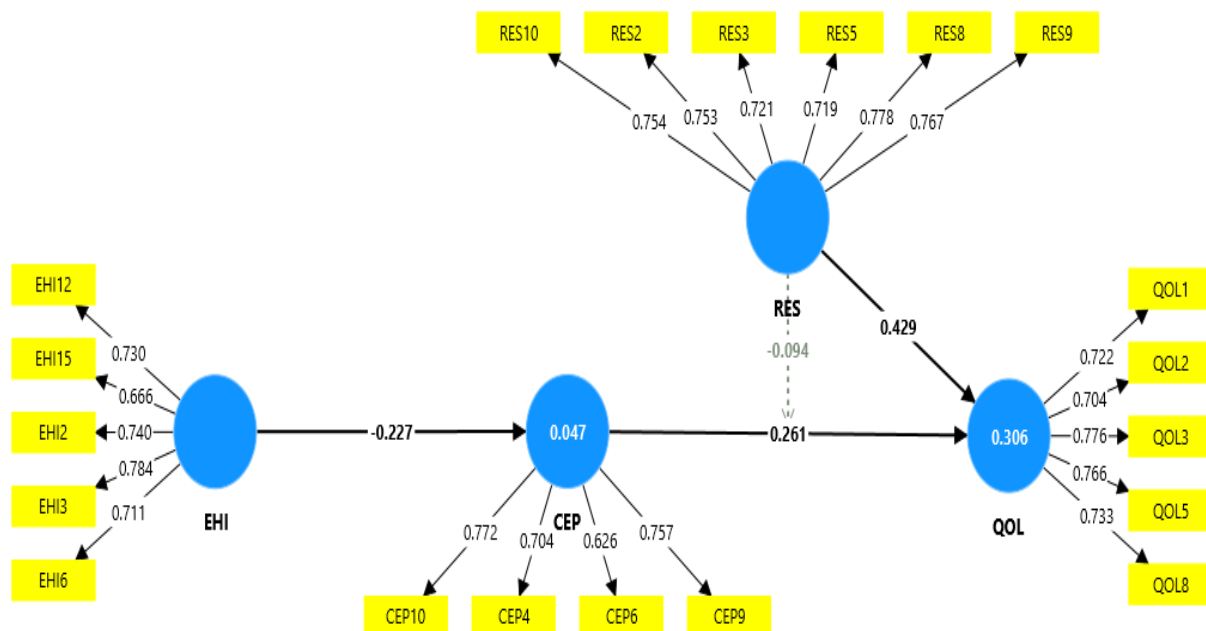


Fig 1: PLS – SEM with path coefficient and R² values

The results of the moderating effect, obtained from the PLS-SEM output, reveal that there is no moderation effect of resilience (RES) on the relationship between Climate and environmental perception (CEP) and Quality of life (QOL) (as depicted in Figure 1). The moderation effect of RES ($\beta = -0.094$, $t = 1.484$, p value is 0.138), which rejects H4. Similarly, the findings are depicted in Table 5.

Discussion and Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to use modified versions of popular and validated questionnaires to examine the impact of climate change on higher education students' mental health. Using PLS-SEM, this study examined the association between emerging health issues (EHI), climate and environmental perception (CEP), resilience (RES), and quality of life (QOL), among university students. Several significant theoretical and practical insights are obtained from the results.

The first findings show that perceptions of the climate and environment are significantly impacted negatively by emerging health issues ($\beta = -0.227$, $p = 0.003$). According to this research, students who face more health-related issues typically have lower levels of environmental awareness. This finding is consistent with the cognitive load theory, which holds that people dealing with stress

and health issues focus their limited cognitive resources on persistent personal issues rather than more general environmental problems (Sweller, 1988). Similarly, studies in environmental psychology show that anxiety and stress can reduce attention on climate-related issues (Clayton, 2020). As emerging health issues increase, climate and environmental perception decrease among university students. The students experience stress, anxiety, and depression, illness and fatigue that tends to prioritise immediate personal health issues and therefore show reduced attention, awareness, and concern towards environmental issues.

The quality of life was found to be positively and significantly impacted by climate and environmental perception ($\beta = 0.261$, $p < 0.001$). This finding strengthens the argument that individuals who are more conscious of their surroundings are more likely to embrace adaptive behaviors that improve their quality of life. According to the Protection Motivation Theory, proactive coping strategies that enhance life outcomes are encouraged by perceived environmental threats (Rogers, 1975). This finding aligns with this theory. Leiserowitz (2006) and Weber (2010), in their study, proved that environmental awareness is positively correlated with health outcomes and life satisfaction. As a result, CEP becomes a significant factor in determining university students' well-being.

The resilience level of the university students was found to have a strong positive effect on quality of life ($\beta = 0.429$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individual resilience is the most influential predictor in the model. This finding is consistent with previous research that verified the critical role of resilience in coping with stress and enhancing well-being to be crucial (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Smith et al., 2008). In the context of higher education, resilience enables students to manage academic and environmental stressors effectively, thereby improving overall life satisfaction.

The moderating effect of resilience on the relationship between CEP and QOL was found not to be statistically significant ($\beta = -0.094$, $p = 0.138$). This suggests that resilience does not significantly alter the strength of the relationship between environmental perception and quality of life. Rather, resilience appears to be a strong direct predictor rather than a buffering variable. This finding is consistent with studies that argue resilience independently enhances well-being rather than moderating external influences (Smith et al., 2008). Overall, the findings highlight that while environmental perception and resilience both contribute to quality of life, resilience plays a dominant role, and health-related challenges may indirectly weaken environmental awareness. This study provides empirical evidence on the interplay between emerging health issues, environmental perception, resilience, and quality of life among higher education students. The results demonstrate that emerging health issues negatively influence environmental perception, while both

environmental awareness and resilience significantly enhance quality of life. Where resilience emerged as the strongest element of quality of life, highlighting its importance in understanding and promoting student well-being. The absence of a moderating effect suggests that resilience functions as an independent psychological resource rather than a conditional factor influencing other relationships.

Limitations of the study

The current study is explorative in nature, as it used only questionnaires that are validated and widely used in clinical settings to measure anxiety, depression, and traumatic symptom burden, and stress in a modified version to measure the extent of the respective symptoms when thinking about climate change. The response rate among the students was quite high. All data was generated from students attending the management program at the same university and therefore should be handled carefully if interpreted into another context, as the prevalence of mental health disorders and attitudes towards climate change may vary regionally or by country. The limitation of the present study is that it is cross-sectional in nature. To establish a more accurate cause-and-effect relationship between climate change and mental health, future longitudinal data is needed. As it is a psychological study, methodological limitations also include the possibility of bias, which may have resulted from the ordering of questions and from the use of unidirectional scales.

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Digital Media Use, Excessive Engagement, and Digital Detox: A Conceptual Framework – Shreya Roy Chowdhury, Jarina, Sarah Hussain and Nimit Chowdhary

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Abstract

Digital media have become an integral part of daily life; billions of users worldwide rely on social networking sites (Facebook), messaging services (WhatsApp), image and video sharing platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and other applications to communicate, seek information or be entertained. However, increasing amounts of research suggest excessive use of digital media can negatively affect both mental health and physical well-being (anxiety, depression, disrupted sleep, compulsive behavior). The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding digital media usage as it transitions from passive to active (and beyond); specifically, how technology (infinite scrolling, algorithmically driven personalized content, push notification) and the user's own motivations to control their use contribute to this progression. Additionally, the findings of this study draw upon three theoretical frameworks: Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution Model [I-PACE]; Conservation of Resources Theory [COR]; and Attention Economy Theory, to frame digital detox not simply as abstention but as an interrupting resource restoration regulatory response to the excessive use cycle.

Keywords: Digital media consumption; excessive use; attention economy; digital detox; conceptual framework; I-PACE model

1. Introduction

Digital media refers to the medium for content that is digitally formatted and delivered via digital products. It includes all forms of digital content, including but not limited to text, images, videos, audio and interactive content (Negi & Akanksha, 2024a). The rapid growth of digital media has dramatically changed the way we communicate using traditional methods of creating and consuming content (Sumberg et al., 2025). This has gone from static websites and emails to live interaction where ordinary individuals can create content that will reach their global audience instantly (Negi & Akanksha, 2024a; Sumberg et al., 2025). As users carry around news, entertainment and connections to others anywhere they go at any time, streaming services like Netflix and Spotify have replaced the scheduled viewing of TV and listening to the radio. Most recently, AI and big data analytics have developed digital media to be more personalized. At least 2.6 billion people used the internet in 2024, and approximately 5.04 billion used social media, with an additional 250 million new social media users per year (Keeley, 2024).

The World Health Organization has stated that digital media channels provide people with faster access to credible health advice, particularly during rapid response times of major public health events (Brony et al., 2024; Chen & Wang, 2021). Entertainment platforms can facilitate creative and relaxing experiences for users beyond simply providing content for viewers. This was an important area of focus, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social media provided both citizens and governments with a means of maintaining civic engagement and sustaining community interactions while physically isolated (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Bhatiasavi, 2024; Du, 2024). These positive effects on user behavior are not unqualified. The very characteristics that allow individuals to connect to others and learn new things, such as the constant accessibility of these resources, how algorithms curate them for each individual's preferences and the ease of engaging with digital content, all contribute to a situation in which users will eventually transition from using digital media positively into overusing digital media negatively.

Problem Statement

Screen time has grown significantly among children, adolescents, and young adults and has increased reported incidents of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, social comparison distress, body image dissatisfaction, attentional fragmentation and sedentary behavior (Twenge et al., 2018; Keles et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). Smartphone and social media use exceeding appropriate levels have been associated with reduced attention spans and sleep deprivation, lower physical activity and emotional instability (kaeprakit et al., 2025) the associations have also included low self-esteem

and high risk of cognitive decline (neophytou et al., 2019), online harassment and negative body image (kelly et al., 2018); however there is still limited longitudinal evidence regarding the relationship between screen time and anxiety across devices and age groups (Tang et al., 2021).

Research Gap

Despite the many empirical studies conducted to date, there exist three limitations that limit the cumulative effect of those studies. The first limitation is that individual study results are generally presented as separate correlations of singular forms of digital media use (e.g., screen time, social media vs. video games, frequency of use) with singular negative effects on youth (i.e., anxiety, poor quality sleep, reduced self-esteem). These relationships are often studied independently of one another and therefore do not provide an integrated explanation for how ordinary levels of engagement result in the development of excessive use, which then leads to potential harm. A second limitation exists in that most studies lack a clear theoretical base for their examination of excessive digital media use and digital detox. In other words, the causes and consequences of excessive use are examined primarily at a surface level (behaviorally) without providing a theoretical framework grounded in established psychology or information systems theories. Such a framework would allow researchers to understand why certain individuals develop from ordinary levels of engagement to potentially harmful levels of engagement while others remain at ordinary levels. Finally, research regarding digital detox has evaluated the effectiveness of various interventions in isolation. As such, it does not include a theoretical explanation of what mechanisms such interventions activate to promote positive changes.

Objectives of the study

- To synthesize the literature on excessive digital and social media use into a theoretically integrated account of its mental and physical health consequences.
- To develop a conceptual model of the transition from digital media engagement to excessive use, and of digital detox as a regulatory response.
- To generate testable propositions that can guide future empirical research on digital media overuse and digital detox effectiveness.

2. Literature review

Digital Media Consumption: Active and Passive Use

Consumer enthusiasm for digital platforms, particularly those used for social networking and online gaming, is increasing (Sharma & Gautam, 2023). A combination of factors influences

consumer decisions about when to adopt these platforms, including content and features offered, cost, convenience, and how the platform delivers on its stated promises (Samala et al., 2021). Ultimately, whether a user adopts an emerging platform also depends upon their attitudes toward the platform, whether they have positive attitudes toward the emotional appeal and functionality of the platform, and to what extent the user feels they can exert control over the platform's functions, with users who feel like they can control the platform more likely to quickly start using the platform (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2005; Tucker, 2014). The COVID-19 Pandemic accelerated this trend, which resulted in consumers directing a disproportionate amount of time and money towards digital platforms (Sharma Nijhawan & Dahiya, 2021).

Theoretically, consumer behavior can be categorized along three lines. Active use represents direct interaction between a consumer and a platform through activities such as sending messages or posting updates. Passive use refers to consuming other people's content without reciprocating back to them through activities such as viewing profiles or browsing feeds (Verduyn et al., 2021). Both types of behaviors have distinct trajectories in terms of the way they contribute to consumers developing habits around using the platforms excessively.

Conceptualizing the Excessive-Use Continuum

Digital screen time, defined as how much time people spend looking at or using their electronic devices, has usually been measured by weekly average use of each device, as well as reason(s) of use, location relative to bedtime, and device used (Kaewpradit et al., 2025). Prior studies have identified "excessive" digital screen time (i.e. beyond established limits) at eight plus hours per day for smartphone use (Maras et al., 2015; Electronic Transactions Development Agency, 2022; Chen et al., 2024); six plus hours per day for tablet use (Santos et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2021; Madhav et al., 2017); and five plus hours per day for computer use (Madhav et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2021). The above-mentioned thresholds represent useful measures of use/overuse (the distinction between the two is less clear in most previous work). However, the literature's almost complete lack of attention to this issue indicates that excessive use/overuse may be more accurately described as a position on a continuum of use rather than as an entirely different state. Use and overuse occur on a continuum determined by both frequency and/or quantity of use.

Mental Health, Addiction-Like Behaviors, and the Excessive-Use Pathway

Digital technology's constant presence in our lives has also been connected to a specific group of psychological problems. Overwhelming amounts of information; being constantly connected through digital means; and having unlimited access to digital information have all resulted in documented negative effects on mental well-being (Scott et al., 2017) in terms of cognition (i.e.

"broken" or "fragmented" attention); emotion (e.g. reduced sense of emotional connection); behaviors (difficulty setting boundaries, excessive needs for instant gratification); and self-perception (reduced self-esteem; lost sense of empathy, etc.) and are associated with a variety of different types of anxiety disorders, mood disorders (Flisher, 2010). There is also an association between excessive daily time spent using digital technology and a higher risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness and lower self-esteem (Akat & Hamarta, 2025). Moreover, when individuals spend extended periods of time engaged in social media use, they report engaging in unhealthy social comparisons and experience increased levels of stress. In addition, because many people feel compelled to respond to each notification immediately upon receiving it, this results in chronic anxiety related to ongoing connections with others through digital means (Akat & Hamarta, 2025). A particularly concerning behavior in terms of how it relates to psychological problems is that of doomscrolling. Doomscrolling is defined as repeatedly consuming large amounts of negative news content. Research indicates that there is a positive relationship between doomscrolling and cynicism, neuroticism, negativity bias, FOMO (fear of missing out) and various physical symptoms including but not limited to headaches, gastrointestinal issues and disrupted sleep patterns (McLaughlin et al., 2023).

Differential Vulnerability Across User Groups

Excessive use of digital media does not affect all members of the community equally; each person has a different level of sensitivity at different stages of their development. For children, it is how much time they spend on digital media that is shaped by their parents' attitudes toward technology as well as what limits they have put in place for them. Children are currently using digital media, on average, for over two hours per day. Excessive use of digital media can be directly related to problems in a child's ability to regulate his/her own behavior. Adolescents and young adults, who extensively engage with devices and the Internet, expose themselves to suicide-promoting information, cyberbullying, and mental health risks (Alonzo et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2023; Vannucci et al., 2020). Adults are also affected by excessive social media use and gaming. In terms of clinical relevance, these represent the ends of the continuum: Problematic Gaming (PG) afflicts approximately three percent of the general public and ten percent of young adults (Gao et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022); Problematic Social Media Use (PSMU) affects about five percent of the general public and thirty-three percent of young adults (Cheng et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2017). Both PG and PSMU are correlated with poor academic performance, decreased wellness, and increased levels of stress (Shannon et al., 2022).

2.5 Digital Detox as a Response to Excessive Use

A digital detox refers to an intentionally taken, voluntary pause from using electronic equipment, specifically mobile phones, as a means of decreasing stress levels and improving face-to-face social interactions (Radtk et al., 2022). The digital detox represents an example of self-regulatory behavior which results from recognizing negative effects caused by technology on relationships, mental well-being and work performance. As stated by Marx et al. (2025), a digital detox is a deliberate action that is designed to mitigate the harm associated with the recreational use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). While there are variations in the length of time for a digital detox intervention, degree of support provided, and methods used to deliver those interventions, most can be classified into two categories: either by encouraging continuous reductions in use through moderation (e.g. disallowing certain apps, limiting phone usage each day); or short-term and predetermined intervals away from social media (Ali et al., 2024; Marciano et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024). Research suggests that individuals who receive both professional assistance (counseling), guidance within group settings, or utilize monitoring tools (e.g. Android Digital Wellbeing, Moment, Detox, Quality, Space) will experience greater success in sustaining their motivation and managing urges to engage in excessive use compared to when they attempt to take a digital detox without the aid of professionals.

3. Theories

3.1 The Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) Model

The I-PACE model (Brand et al., 2016) presents an explanation for both the creation of and maintenance of certain types of Internet-use disorders based on three factors that interact to create the disorder. Those include; Predisposition in terms of personality, psychological issues and other biological risk factors; how you emotionally react to your environment in terms of what you see and experience; and how well you can regulate your behavior through self-control. When applied to Digital Media, it provides a way to explain why similar platform features produce differing reactions among people using those platforms. According to I-Pace theory, users who have less self-regulation ability or greater emotional sensitivity to their social environment will develop excessive use habits faster than users lacking such predispositions.

3.2 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) states that people try to obtain, keep, and protect valuable sources (Time, Attention, Emotional Energy); additionally, they suffer from a degree of psychological strain when their source(s) are under threat, have been lost or spent with little payoff. The chronic depletion of the user's "attentional" and "emotional" resources through excessive digital media use represents an example of how this principle would apply; conversely, digital detox would represent

a proactive method of replenishing those same "attentional" and "emotional" resource reserves that have been drained.

3.3 Attention Economy Theorizing

Theorists of the "attention economy" (Davenport & Beck, 2001) consider a user's attention in and of itself to be the scarce resource on which many of today's digital business models are built. Consequently, when we see design elements like "infinite scroll" or "push notifications," they can be seen as not accidental, but designed to increase your total usage time; thus positioning users' long use patterns as somewhat an outgrowth of platform design, as opposed to purely an issue of individuals failing to control themselves.

4. Discussion

The above findings from the literature reviews and theoretical applications have led to three conclusions. Firstly, Brand et al.'s (2016) I-PACE model, as well as previous studies' (Dinçer & Topçu, 2022; Shutzman & Gershky, 2023; Alonzo et al., 2021; Vannucci et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022) representation of the differential susceptibility of children, adolescents and adults to excessive digital use demonstrate that excessive use is neither uniform nor solely due to an individual's regulatory capacity, but rather the result of a dynamic interplay between regulatory capacity and the design elements of social media platforms. Secondly, Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory reframes many of the previously cited negative effects of digital use, including stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep deprivation, as evidence of resource depletion, thus suggesting that the primary function of digital detoxes — whether they take the form of a short-term or long-term abstinence from technology (Radtke et al., 2022; Marx et al., 2025), lies in restoring lost resources rather than mere abstention. Finally, Davenport and Beck's (2001) attention economy theory demonstrates that many of the technological transitions underlying excessive use documented in this review — including infinite scrolling, push notifications and personalized algorithms — are structural design elements embedded in social media platforms that nearly all users encounter regardless of their individual susceptibility to overuse (Marx et al., 2025).

The three theories discussed above do not operate independently of each other. Rather, they exist in a dialectical relationship with one another. The I-PACE model can be used alone to place responsibility for excessive use within the user, thereby implying that excessive use is the result of poor self-regulation. As has been demonstrated by research showing that excessive use is associated with decreased executive functioning and increased affective reactivity to social media cues (Flisher, 2010; Kaewpradit et al., 2025), better-disciplined individuals can presumably regulate

their own behavior and therefore avoid excessive use. On the other hand, attention economy theory can be used to place responsibility for excessive use within the social media platform itself. Design features like infinite scrolling, push notifications, and algorithmically tailored content are designed to maximize user retention and minimize abandonment (Tucker, 2014), and because these design features are now ubiquitous across almost all mainstream social media platforms (Marx et al., 2025), it follows that while individual differences may influence patterns of use, structural design choices dominate.

Neither perspective alone fully captures the pattern, where both a stable and predictable individual-level vulnerability gradient across children, adolescents, and adults (Vannucci et al., 2020; Dinçer & Topçu, 2022; Cheng et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022) and near-universal exposure to identical manipulative design features among users (Marx et al., 2025). Conservation of Resources Theory provides a way to reconcile these perspectives. By conceptualizing attention and emotional energy as limited resources that external demands exhaust at rates that vary based on the individual's regulatory capacities (i.e. I-PACE), COR theory enables us to account for both the structure-based aspects of excessive use (e.g. Marx et al., 2025), and the individual deficit-based explanations of excessive use (e.g. Flisher, 2010), rather than being forced to choose between them. Additionally, this reconciliation provides the rationale for modeling digital media engagement as a continuum rather than as a discrete "addicted/not addicted" dichotomy. A continuum model is consistent with the dose-response evidence demonstrating that screen time is related to incremental levels of psychological distress rather than some absolute threshold (Neophytou et al., 2019; Twenge et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2018), allowing researchers to study large populations of users who experience variable degrees of harm without reaching clinical thresholds (Santos et al., 2023; Shannon et al., 2022).

Together, these insights provide a foundation for developing a conceptual framework for understanding digital media engagement that models engagement as a continuous variable, acknowledges both platform-level and individual-level drivers of the transition to excessive use, and views digital detoxes as theoretically based strategies for regulating usage rather than acts of willpower alone. In addition, the development of such frameworks is empirically supported by research indicating that detox interventions that include components such as counseling, group support and/or monitoring tools yield greater effectiveness when compared to unassisted self-directed detoxification efforts (Schmuck, 2020; Coyne & Woodruff, 2023). This paper approaches the development of such a framework conceptually rather than empirically; i.e. it does not report results from original data collection/analysis; instead, it aims to synthesize relevant theoretical concepts (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020). Relevant literature was identified via searches

through Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science and ResearchGate databases, supplemented with reports issued by governments and WHO organized around key concepts critical to developing the proposed conceptual framework: type(s) of engagement, transition drivers to excessive use, health-related consequences of excessive use, vulnerability factors to excessive use and potential mechanisms for detoxification.

5. Framework development

Continuum of Digital Engagement and Restoration (CoDER) framework

The proposed model (Figure 1) portrays digital media engagement as a continuous process (i.e., a process over time) rather than an either-or situation. The first step is represented by two types of engagement: Passive consumption and Active Consumption. Both of these can be viewed as common, normal ways of using technology. As the frequency and duration of such uses increase, they convert to Habitual Use. Beyond another level of engagement or frequency, the Habits will then develop into excessive use. In order to determine when users switch from Habits to excessive use, there is a relationship between Technological Transition Drivers (Continuous Notifications, Infinite Scroll, Algorithmic Personalization) and Individual Transition Drivers (Psychological State, Age, Motivation, Self-Control) that is similar to the Person-Time-Platform Interaction Logic that underlies the I-PACE Model. Once users engage in excessive use of their digital technologies, they may experience a number of consequences. Some of these consequences will be Positive (Social Connectivity, Recreational and Emotional Value, Learning); other consequences will be Negative (Compulsive Behavior, Psychological Distress, Reduced Productivity, Sleep Disruption). When users begin to accumulate the negative consequences of excessive digital media use, they will also have opportunities to implement Digital Detoxes and Coping Strategies (Periodic Disengagement, Time Management, Mindful Usage, Support Mechanisms). These Digital Detoxes and Coping Strategies will serve as a Regulatory Feedback Mechanism that restores Depleted Resources and moderates the user's position on the Use-to-Excessive Use Continuum.

This framework has significance on three levels. At the Theoretical Level, this work represents one of the few works in the field of digital media that integrates multiple theoretical traditions (I-PACE, COR Theory, Attention Economy) into one comprehensive model for explaining how people use digital media in everyday life. Each of these theoretical traditions has typically been used separately within a discrete context (Clinical Disorders, Organizational Stress, Platform Business Models). At the Methodological Level, this work transforms a large body of disconnected correlational data about daily digital media use into seven testable hypotheses or propositions.

These seven propositions will allow researchers to design studies that compare across studies and provide clear tests for the development of new knowledge. Practically, this framework will be useful in developing Diagnostics based upon the identification of drivers (technological vs. individual) associated with negative outcomes. This framework will help guide various stakeholders (e.g., platform developers/designers, educators/pedagogues, policymakers'/government officials, etc.) toward the implementation of targeted interventions.”

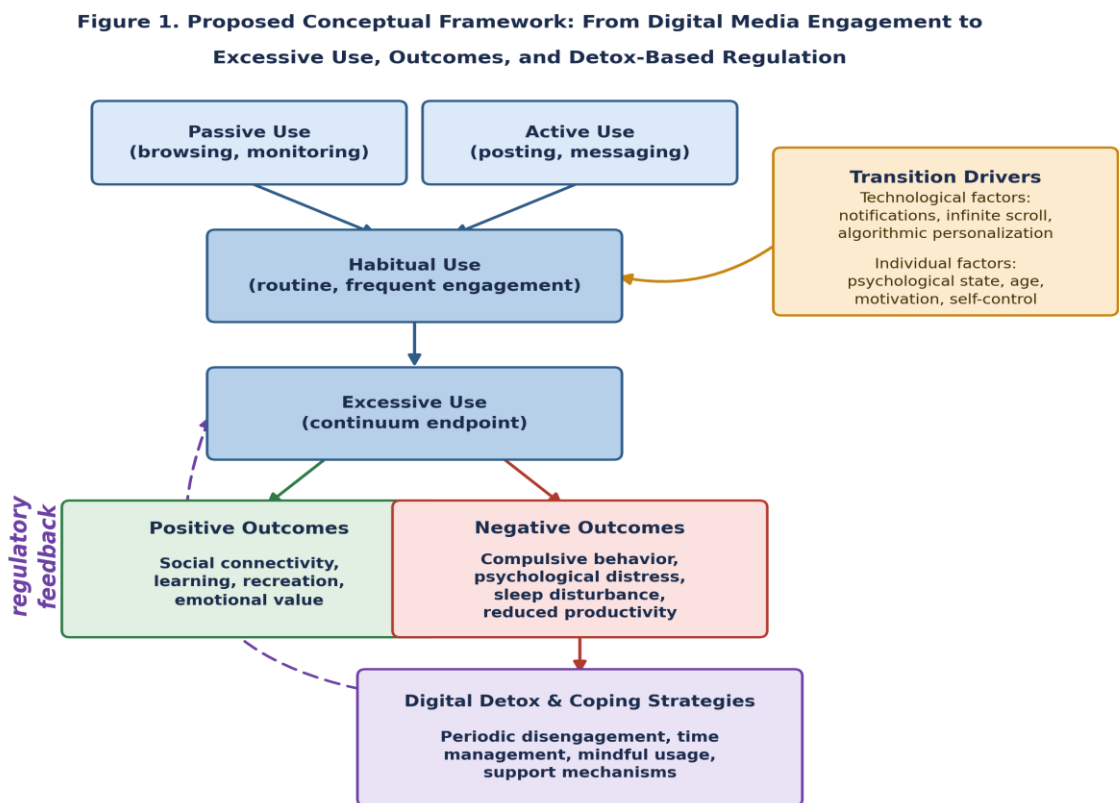


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework linking digital media engagement, transition drivers, excessive use, outcomes, and digital detox as a regulatory feedback mechanism. Source: Authors' own work.

5.2 Propositions

The following propositions formalize the relationships depicted in Figure 1 and are intended to guide future empirical testing.

P1: *The greater the frequency and duration of an individual's passive and active engagement with digital media, the more likely that engagement is to convert into habitual use over time.*

P2: *Technological transition drivers (infinite scroll, push notifications, algorithmic personalization) are positively associated with the conversion of habitual use into excessive use, independent of the user's own motivation to disengage.*

P3: *Individual transition drivers (psychological state, age, motivation, self-control) moderate the strength of the relationship between habitual use and excessive use, such that users with weaker self-regulatory capacity show a stronger habitual-to-excessive-use transition.*

P4: *Excessive digital media use is positively associated with negative psychological outcomes (stress, anxiety, depression, doomscrolling-related distress) and negative physiological outcomes (sleep disruption, musculoskeletal strain, fatigue).*

P5: *The positive association between excessive use and negative outcomes (P4) is stronger among children and adolescents than among adults, reflecting age-related differences in self-regulatory capacity.*

P6: *Digital detox and coping strategies negatively moderate the relationship between excessive use and negative outcomes, such that engagement in detox strategies is associated with a weaker excessive-use-to-negative-outcome relationship.*

P7: *Supported digital detox interventions (professional counseling, guided group sessions, monitoring-tool assistance) are associated with greater improvement in well-being than unsupported, self-directed detox attempts.*

6. Theoretical, social, and practical contribution

Theoretical Contribution

This study provides one unified conceptualization and theoretical foundation for all previous studies regarding the relationship of digital media usage to individual health. While other research has primarily found a number of correlations between digital media usage and health, this study:

- (a) identifies the process by which everyday exposure to digital media develops into excessive use;
- (b) uses established theories (COR, I-PACE and the attention economy) as explanations for these processes;
- (c) develops a clearly specified and theoretically supported definition of digital detox as an intervention to regulate problematic behavior.

Those boundaries need to be defined more clearly: The framework expects users will have relatively consistent access to their devices and are neutral toward whether it is used via long- vs. short-form video platforms, texting applications etc. The framework also does not currently

include cultural variation in social norms related to digital sociability as a moderator of those relationships.

Social Contribution

The proposed theoretical framework can serve to enhance the social dialogue on digital well-being at the societal level. As such, the model will provide a common language, which is based on theory, to discuss harms resulting from digital media consumption and move beyond the simplistic measures used today to measure or limit screen time. The model will support the need for digital literacy education programs that promote conscious and responsible engagement with digital media (and not simply restricting access), and provide a basis to hold platforms accountable for their design decisions. This includes design choices related to infinite scrolling, algorithmic personalized content recommendations, and push notifications, and how these choices lead to harm. Ultimately, this model will help create an intersection point between the discussion on digital well-being at the individual/clinical level and the broader discussion at the social/public health level regarding platform accountability.

Practical Contribution

The need to control overuse of digital media necessitates coordination among those who use digital media; families using it with their children; and platform developers creating the environments where people engage with digital media. Individuals (especially students) are responsible for developing an internal sense of direction or regulation when engaging digitally, by decreasing non-directed, passive "scroll" behavior on screens; by limiting their total screen time; and by increasing their ability to be resilient against the negative effects of digital media through engaging in offline activities/hobbies/social interactions. Parents at the family level have the responsibility of establishing routine patterns for their families that include monitoring their children's online behaviors, supporting them emotionally; and having ongoing conversations about how they feel about what they do online. Platform developers have a moral/ethical obligation to create platforms that place users' needs first, by providing usage tracking capabilities; reminding users of their total screen time; and removing from their default settings, manipulative design techniques (i.e., infinite scrolling defaults; auto-play); and other features identified as major technology transition drivers. Ultimately, sustainable digital engagement is everyone's collective responsibility to manage together.

7. Conclusion

Digital media provides many positive outcomes such as accessing information, connecting with others and entertainment; however, it also presents significant risks in terms of potential damage to an individual's psychological wellbeing and their ability to process cognitively. This paper has demonstrated that digital media use should be viewed as being on a continuum whereby normal everyday usage will increasingly become excessive through prolonged exposure and habituation; and that these two influences occur concurrently at the level of platforms (via notifications, infinite scrolling, algorithmic-based personalized content delivery) and the individual (through motivation, levels of stress and control over one's own behavior). The proposed framework for conceptualizing how digital detox works to restore resources lost due to excessive digital media consumption (using I-PACE, COR theory and attention economy theoretical perspectives), places digital detox as a theoretically conceived regulatory mechanism rather than simply a period of abstinence. The seven propositions identified above represent a beginning point for empirical research that will allow researchers to transition this area of study from describing associations to developing an empirically testable body of theory.

Limitations

Limitations of this research stem from its conceptual design. Primary data collection did not occur in this study; instead, all theory is based upon empirical validation. A secondary literature review which utilized various databases was structured to support the development of a conceptual model versus the comprehensive nature of a systematic review. Finally, the theoretical frameworks (I-PACE, COR, attention economy) used within this research provide one possible combination of many theoretical models supported by existing literature.

Future research directions

The hypotheses proposed need to be tested empirically with a possible longitudinal design that allows researchers to determine causality in relation to time between type of engagement, transition drivers, and outcome. At present, there are mixed findings from previous research on cross-sectional studies, which has made it difficult to establish longitudinal evidence (Tang et al., 2021). A cross-cultural approach will allow researchers to investigate the conditions identified specifically: connectivity context and cultural norms related to digital sociality. Research will also be required to test P3 & P5 as formal moderator variables through testing age, gender, and dependency levels (CQ3), and the effects of supported versus unsupported detoxification programs (P7) as per controlled experimental designs.

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Positioning Guwahati as the Gateway to Healing: A Conceptual Framework for Medical Tourism in Northeast India - Aarshi Arora, Vijay Kumar and Nazir Chesam

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Abstract

Guwahati, the gateway city to Northeast India, is emerging as the medical hub in the Northeast region of India. It possesses great potential in the field of medical tourism owing to its constantly improving healthcare infrastructure, including a range of major medical chains available, like Apollo Hospital, Fortis Healthcare, etc. The other key advantages are its affordability, accessibility, and authenticity. This paper aimed to explore how Guwahati can be positioned as a regional hub for medical tourism supported by the destination positioning theories. The research relied on secondary sources, drawing data from academic literature, government reports and hospital tariffs. The paper gave insights into Guwahati's affordability, accessibility, and authenticity, which interlink and form the basis for the framework on "Medical Destination Positioning Triangle".

The paper draws on Echtner and Ritchie's (1993) Destination Image and Positioning Framework and Kotler's (1997) price–quality matrix. The research conceptualised Guwahati's positioning as "Affordable, Accessible, Authentic Care."

The framework focused on functional positioning involving affordability and accessibility, symbolic positioning which involved emphasising Guwahati's identity as the gateway to Northeast India and experiential positioning that involved the integration of modern medical technologies with traditional healing and wellness like Reiki healing and Tibetan medicine. Through the secondary evidence, it is indicated that Guwahati offers significant cost and technological advantages in improving healthcare infrastructure compared to other northeastern states in India. Given the advantages, there is also an increasing regional inflow from neighbouring

countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Despite these challenges, Guwahati faces challenges such as limited accreditation, lower visibility, and strong branding. The conceptual model thus positioned Guwahati as an emerging sub-brand within India's medical tourism and initiatives like "Heal in India", emphasising inclusivity of the middle class, and regionally oriented development. The paper concluded by proposing recommendations for policymakers and healthcare institutions that can help in operationalising the proposed positioning through integrated branding, accreditation expansion, and cross-border collaboration.

Keywords: Medical Tourism; Destination Positioning; Guwahati; Northeast India; Destination Image

1. Introduction

Medical tourism is defined as the movement of tourists to countries where they do not ordinarily reside to access medical care. It has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism economy (Biswas & Rai, 2022). It includes specialised surgeries, wellness therapies, and alternative healing practices. It encompasses a wide range of healthcare services, from critical treatments such as cardiac and orthopaedic surgeries to elective procedures like cosmetic surgery and fertility treatments. In recent years, medical tourism has expanded to include wellness and preventive healthcare, with patients seeking holistic healing through traditional therapies like Ayurveda, naturopathy, and yoga. Moving from those ancient days, modern healthcare consumers today regulate their itineraries, combining both medical treatment and leisure. Today, ever increasing numbers travel internationally for medical treatment, driven by the promise of quality care at an affordable price.

1.1 Global and National Trends in Medical Tourism

Globally, medical tourism has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, with destinations such as Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, and India emerging as preferred choices for international patients (Bookman & Bookman, 2007). The global medical market is expected to reach USD 286.1 Billion by 2030 (FICCI, n.d.). The treatment cost savings in India and other regional hub commonly fall in the ~50–80% range compared with the USA/Western nations (FICCI et al., 2018). The Indian hospital market is projected to reach 202.5 billion at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of around 10.61 by 2030 (FICCI, n.d.). And Major cities like Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore have established themselves as medical tourism hubs. The Indian government has also introduced initiatives such as the Ayushman Bharat Health Scheme, the Medical Visa (M-Visa) and 'heal in India' to facilitate the influx of foreign patients seeking treatment in the country.

The northern and eastern metropolitan areas of India, namely Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Delhi are very well-established in terms of providing medical tourism. On the other hand, there are a number of locations that are much less involved with medical tourism than others. One of these is Northeast India which is being viewed by many as an unexploited frontier. The reasons for this include; Northeast India's geographic location; infrastructure issues; and lack of brand recognition. Northeast India has the unique advantage of being geographically positioned to be able to act as a medical hub for neighboring countries including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar. As reported previously, patients who live in Northeast India often travel away from home for health care. In particular, Guwahati - the capital of Assam and the largest city in Northeast India - is the best developed node in terms of healthcare, education, and transportation in Northeast India (Bezborah et al., 2025). In addition to GNRC, Apollo Hospitals Guwahati, Nemcare Super Specialty Hospital, Rahman Hospitals and Ayursundra Super specialty hospital among other tertiary hospitals provide medical services in Guwahati for patients from across the region including surrounding states and neighboring nations. Guwahati has been known historically as "the Gateway to the Northeast" therefore it would appear that this area could now also be promoted as "the Gateway to Health".

- **Geographical Location:** Assam provides an entry point into the northeast of the country and acts as a link with neighboring countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar who are less equipped in terms of health care services. There exists geographic clustering of demand for medical tourism across northeast India, specifically within Kamrup metropolitan and other districts of Assam (Biswas & Rai, 2022). The transportation system in Guwahati is quite developed with the presence of Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International airport, railways and roadways making it easily accessible for those seeking travel for medical purposes.

- **Affordable Healthcare:** The cost of health care services in Assam is significantly lower compared to those found in major urban centers; therefore, it represents a viable option for those seeking medical tourism. Additionally, the region has developed a growing population of experienced doctors, nurses, and other qualified health care professionals educated based on international standards. Biswas & Rai (2022) have documented affordable health care and access to medical insurance as two of the primary demand drivers for this emerging market.

- **Growing Healthcare Infrastructure:** The need for medical tourists is influenced by the availability of specialized infrastructure, the variety of advanced medical specialties, hospital accreditation/ ranking (Biswas & Rai, 2022) and quality of treatment provided as well as the competence of doctors. Guwahati has established itself as a regional health care centre with top tier hospitals, specialty clinics and medical colleges. The city is home to several high-end hospitals,

including Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), Apollo Hospitals, Hayat Hospital and Nemcare Hospital, that offer a wide variety of medical specialities.

- **Integration of Traditional Healing:** Assam has a rich tradition of indigenous healing practices, including Ayurveda, naturopathy, and herbal medicine, which can complement modern medical services. (Baker, 2015; Banerjee et al., 2026).
- **Government Initiatives:** Assam's government has been promoting healthcare infrastructure through public-private partnerships and policy interventions aimed at improving medical services and attracting international patients.

1.2 Problem Statement:

Although there are developing health-care services and regional transportation connections, Guwahati is still without a defined brand image within India's medical tourism market (Bezborah et al., 2025). The majority of national and international marketing focuses upon the country's metropolitan regions and therefore overlooks the unique cultural and natural resources located throughout the Northeast which have the potential to provide complementary holistic recovery to clinical treatment. Although there is an identified conceptual void regarding how smaller regional cities such as Guwahati may integrate its functional benefits (affordable, accessible) with experiential authenticity (natural beauty, traditions, spiritual practices) to develop a uniquely differentiating medical-tourism identity; this research seeks to investigate how Guwahati may identify itself as the "Gateway to Healing" through combining affordability with modern health care and regional holistic experiences to create a distinct medical-tourism brand identity.

2. Objectives

RO1. To examine how Guwahati can position itself as the Gateway to Healing within the Indian and South Asian medical-tourism context.

RO2. To conceptualise a Medical Destination Positioning Triangle integrating affordability, modern care, and holistic experience.

RO3. To construct a Destination Positioning Framework that aligns functional, symbolic, and experiential positioning strategies.

RO4. To recommend policy and branding implications for public and private stakeholders seeking to promote regional medical tourism.

3. Research Significance

The conceptualisation of Guwahati as a medical-tourism destination has dual significance. In practice, it expands India's medical tourism landscape beyond traditional centres, promoting

balanced regional development. Theoretically, it contributes to destination positioning literature by extending existing frameworks to peripheral or emerging destinations. The “Gateway to Healing” idea fuses economic and cultural narratives, aligning infrastructure-driven competitiveness with the psychological and symbolic meanings central to place branding.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Medical Tourism: Global Trends and Conceptualisation

Medical tourism has been defined in multiple ways depending on its disciplinary lens. From an economic perspective, it refers to the international flow of patients seeking medical treatment abroad, often motivated by cost differentials, quality of care, and service availability. From a sociocultural standpoint, it involves complex narratives of trust, identity, and wellness in unfamiliar environments.

4.2 Drivers of Global Medical Tourism

The global expansion of medical tourism has been fuelled by several key factors.

- a. **Cost Advantages:** Treatments in developing countries like India, Thailand, and Malaysia cost between 20% and 80% less than in Western nations (Biswas & Rai, 2022; FICCI et al., 2018)
 - b. **Advancements in Medical Technology:** Rapid diffusion of modern medical technologies, particularly in private hospitals, has enabled developing destinations to compete on quality (Biswas & Rai, 2022).
 - c. **Reduced Travel Barriers:** Visa liberalisation, low-cost airlines, and digital health communication facilitate cross-border healthcare mobility.
 - d. **Globalisation of Healthcare Brands:** Accreditation systems (e.g., JCI, NABH) enhance international confidence in service standards (Banerjee et al., 2026; Biswas & Rai, 2022).
- These factors converge to create an increasingly competitive global marketplace where destinations must differentiate themselves beyond price.

4.3 India’s Position in the Global Medical Tourism Market

India’s medical tourism sector has witnessed exponential growth since the early 2000s. According to the Medical Value Travel Report (FICCI, 2022), the country attracts over two million foreign patients annually, with significant inflows from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Africa. The government’s Heal in India and Ayush Visa programs have sought to consolidate this market by integrating traditional systems of medicine (Bookman & Bookman, 2007)—Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy—with modern medical services. While metro cities dominate the market, regional cities like Guwahati hold latent potential. Their lower costs, emerging

healthcare infrastructure, and cultural uniqueness could diversify India's overall portfolio and cater to patients seeking less crowded, more personalised healing environments.

4.4. Destination Positioning: Concepts and Frameworks

Destination positioning is the most important concept in tourism marketing. It refers to creating a distinct, desirable, and competitive image of a place in the minds of target consumers (Buhalis, 2000; Kotler, 1997).

Kotler's Price-Quality matrix (1997), also known as the nine quality-pricing strategy, can be used in the context of destination positioning of medical tourism. It indicated nine possible outcomes or strategies based on the relationship between price and perceived quality. The high price–high quality representing premium strategy which in this context can be corresponded to premium medical destinations for e.g., Switzerland for healthcare. The low price–high quality represents super value strategy and can be corresponded to value-driven destinations for e.g., India, Thailand. The low price–low quality strategy represents economy strategy that in medical tourism context represents economically weak destinations with low medical treatment quality. The high price–low quality which is also called rip-off strategy indicates poor value or an unfavourable price-quality positioning destinations, high-value strategy: high quality, medium price then overcharging strategy then medium quality, high price, then medium value strategy: medium quality, medium price, further is the good-value strategy: medium quality, low price, and false economy strategy: low quality, medium price. Guwahati's potential lies in the low price–high quality outcome or super value strategy. It offers modern treatment quality at comparatively lower costs. It appeals to regional and international patients seeking value-for-money healthcare. Especially in the Northeast region and South Asian countries.

4.5 Differentiation and Perceived Value

In order for positioning to be productive, it must be effective. Effective positioning is based on identifying the differentiator or unique selling proposition of a destination in comparison to its competitors. As Buhalis (2000) explains, destination competitiveness derives from combining core resources (natural, cultural, infrastructural) with supporting factors (accessibility, governance, branding). Guwahati can leverage its core resources, which are its strategic location, natural serenity, and cultural authenticity. Combined with its supporting factors, which are improved connectivity, hospital quality, and policy support. Its merging can lead to the formation of Guwahati's image as a 'healing gateway' rather than merely a regional healthcare provider.

4.6 Destination Image Theory: Echtner and Ritchie (1993):

The foundational work of Echtner and Ritchie (1993) conceptualises destination image as a multidimensional concept, proposing a framework based on three continua. Attribute–holistic:

from tangible features (price, infrastructure) to overall impressions, functional–psychological: from measurable attributes (cost, quality) to emotional perceptions (trust, tranquillity) and common–unique: from traits shared by many destinations to those that define distinctiveness. This framework emphasises that destination positioning not only focuses on what a place offers but also on how it is perceived.

In medical tourism, the functional image indicates quality healthcare at affordable prices and accessibility, while the psychological image indicates warm hospitality, trust, and emotional comfort. Unique images indicate projecting Guwahati as a gateway to the northeast's culture and natural serenity. These dimensions together contribute to a composite destination image of healing.

4.7 Healing and Wellness Tourism: Integrating Nature and Culture

Wellness tourism is a broader domain encompassing travel motivated by health enhancement, rejuvenation, and spiritual well-being (Brooks, 2012; Hartwell, 2014; Voigt & Pforr, 2013). Medical tourism focuses on treatment, while wellness tourism emphasises prevention and holistic balance. In the modern trend, patients are seeking both medical cares followed by recovery retreats. Destinations such as Thailand and Bali are well known for integrating post-treatment recovery with wellness experiences like meditation, traditional therapies, and eco-retreats. These hybrid models appeal to travellers seeking holistic well-being rather than isolated medical procedures (Hartwell, 2014). The Northeast region of India has rich traditions of herbal medicine, indigenous healing, and eco-spiritual practices. For example, the Mishing and Bodo communities of Assam use herbal remedies and healing chants, plant-based therapies by Meghalaya's traditional healers, or U Nong ai dawai, Arunachal Pradesh's tribal healing rituals, which highlight harmony with nature and spiritual restoration. By integrating these practices with modern healthcare, Guwahati can form a distinctive, authentic healing identity (Hartwell, 2014). Patients are not only medical clients rather wellness seekers desiring physical, emotional, and spiritual recovery. Guwahati's proximity to serene riverine landscapes, hills, and forests also adds to its healing identity.

Several Indian cities have successfully positioned themselves as medical tourism destinations by leveraging their healthcare infrastructure and international branding. Chennai: Known as the "Health Capital of India," Chennai attracts patients from across the globe, with hospitals like Apollo and Fortis leading the sector (Deloitte, 2019). Mumbai: The city's multi-speciality hospitals and connectivity to international airports contribute to its high patient influx (Rao, 2021). Kerala: Kerala integrates Ayurvedic wellness tourism with modern medical services, making it a sought-after destination for holistic healing (Mukherjee & Maiti, 2022).

Although India's medical-tourism literature is extensive, very few studies address regional destination positioning within the field. Most focus on macro-level analyses of India's competitiveness vis-à-vis Thailand or Malaysia (Bookman & Bookman, 2007; Heung et al., 2010). There is limited conceptual work on how secondary cities like Guwahati can leverage symbolic identity for medical tourism and how traditional healing and natural environments can be integrated into destination positioning strategies. This paper fills that gap by proposing a theory-based framework linking functional, symbolic, and experiential positioning to Guwahati's regional potential of becoming a medical hub.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a conceptual research design, which focused on the theoretical exploration of Guwahati's positioning as a regional hub for medical tourism within India and South Asia. The methodology adopted is qualitative, relying exclusively on secondary sources of data extracted from existing academic literature, policy documents, government reports, industry reports, and hospitality tariff information. It employs interpretive analysis to identify conceptual gaps, relationships, and positioning opportunities for Guwahati. The analysis is based on the major destination marketing and positioning theories, primarily Echtner and Ritchie's (1993) Destination Image Framework, Kotler's (1997) Price-Quality Matrix, and Buhalis's (2000) Destination Competitiveness Model to construct a conceptual framework for Guwahati's medical tourism positioning.

Through theoretical synthesis and conceptual mapping, the study developed two analytical models. First, is the Medical Destination Positioning Triangle, that links affordability, modern care, and holistic experience. Second, is the Destination Positioning Framework, that links functional, symbolic and experiential strategies.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Synthesis

Academic literature provides evidence for Guwahati's positioning through Kotler's (1994) matrix, which provides the economic logic of positioning (price and quality), Echtner and Ritchie (1993), which provides the psychological and perceptual logic of destination image, and Voigt and Pforr (2013) extend this to wellness and experiential logic.

Through the integration of these, Guwahati's positioning can be conceptualised through three synergistic dimensions: Functional: Affordability and accessibility (Hartwell, 2014) (modern medical infrastructure, value), Symbolic: Gateway identity (bridge between India and Southeast

Asia) (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), Experiential: Authentic healing (integration of culture, nature, and wellness) (Voigt & Pforr, 2013).

6.2 Conceptual Framework: Positioning Guwahati as the Gateway to Healing:

Positioning a destination in the medical-tourism domain requires constructing a multi-dimensional identity that appeals to economic logic (affordability and accessibility), emotional trust (safety and cultural warmth), and holistic experience (healing beyond treatment). The Gateway to Healing concept is built on three dimensions that is: Affordability: Guwahati's healthcare services are significantly less expensive than those in Indian metros yet maintain comparable clinical standards.

Table 1: Comparative costs of common medical procedures (in INR)

Procedure	Delhi	Mumbai	Chennai	Guwahati	% Cost Reduction in Guwahati
Knee Replacement	₹3,50,000	₹3,20,000	₹3,50,000	₹2,00,000	35–45%
Open Heart Surgery	₹4,50,000	₹4,25,000	₹3,50,000	₹2,75,000	40%
Cancer Treatment	₹6,00,000	₹5,80,000	₹3,50,000	₹3,50,000	42%
Cosmetic Surgery	₹2,00,000	₹1,80,000	₹3,50,000	₹1,00,000	40–50%

Source: Hospital Price Comparisons (2024)

The second important aspect is accessibility. The city's location and continuously improving transport links make it a natural gateway to both the Indian Northeast and neighbouring countries. The third important dimension is authenticity. The surrounding natural and cultural landscape offers unique possibilities for integrating modern medicine with traditional healing and wellness retreats, owing to the availability of Tibetan medicine, reiki healing, herbal remedies and healing chants by Mishing and Bodo communities of Assam, plant based therapies by Meghalaya's traditional healers, or U nong ai dawai, and Arunachal Pradesh's tribal healing rituals highlight harmony with nature and spiritual restoration. A combination of these factors supports a three-pillar model of destination positioning: Functional, Symbolic, and Experiential.

6.3 Functional Positioning: Affordability and Accessibility

Functional positioning emphasises the tangible, measurable benefits of a destination that directly focus on the service delivery, cost, and convenience. Guwahati persists in cost Competitiveness as

shown in Table 1. Treatment costs in Guwahati's tertiary hospitals are significantly lower than in metropolitan India. This cost advantage appeals strongly to price-sensitive markets in Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar, as well as in other parts of north-eastern states like Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, etc. Further, the availability of technologically advanced treatments, infrastructure and healthcare facilities (Baker, 2015) is an add-on to Guwahati. Hospitals such as GNRC, Apollo Guwahati, Nemcare, Rahaman Hospital and Down Town Hospital offer specialised care in cardiology, oncology, neurology, and organ transplantation (Heung et al., 2010). Private hospitals have affordability, quality, accreditation, digitalisation and branding advantage (Banerjee et al., 2026). Hospital accreditation is an important indicator of recognised healthcare which adds to the patient confidence regarding medical tourism destinations. (Baker, 2015; Banerjee et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2011)

In terms of Accessibility, the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport (LGBI) connects Guwahati with major Indian metros and several South Asian capitals. The expansion of Asian Highway 1 and regional rail links further enhances connectivity, English and Hindi proficiency among healthcare staff dealing with culturally similar patient populations from neighbouring countries, and enhances comfort and trust. This provides language and service support. The Functional positioning can be made as "High-quality medical care at affordable prices, easily accessible within the heart of Northeast India." This highlights Guwahati's economic value proposition and indicates its competitive advantage within Kotler's Low-Price-High-Quality outcome.

6.4. Symbolic Positioning: The Gateway Identity

Apart from economic value or affordability, destinations require symbolic meaning. Symbolic meaning indicates a narrative that resonates with place identity with visitor aspiration. Digital campaigns, storytelling, testimonials and liaisons build trust and recognition for a medical tourism destination (Banerjee et al., 2026). Guwahati is already known as the "Gateway to Northeast India." By extending this metaphor to healing, the city can symbolically link together geography and health. This indicates Guwahati as the entry point to a wider region of wellness resources (Assam's Ayurveda centres, Meghalaya's eco-retreats, Arunachal's spiritual landscapes) as well as a medical bridge linking India's advanced healthcare with neighbouring countries lacking such infrastructure. Further establishing a link between Culture and Care indicates a multidimensional experience. This leads to the formation of Guwahati as a storytelling destination. It cultivates the meaning of healing in both literal and metaphorical form. The pitch to symbolic positioning can be "Guwahati: The Gateway to Healing—where India's care meets Asia's culture."

6.5 Experiential Positioning: Authentic Healing and Natural Recovery

The third dimension of positioning involves the experiential realm. This refers to the sensory, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that shape how visitors feel or experience emotionally during and after their medical visit (Brooks, 2012; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Guwahati's natural environment, surrounded by hills and forested areas along the Brahmaputra, offers tranquil settings ideal for the post-treatment journey. Research in environmental psychology suggests that exposure to natural landscapes accelerates recovery by reducing stress and improving mood (Hartwell, 2014). Combining the hospital care with access to eco-retreats or riverfront wellness centres could accelerate patients' physical and mental health recovery (Hartwell, 2014).

As discussed, Assam and its neighbouring states possess diverse healing traditions like herbal medicine, massage therapies, Tibetan medicine, Reiki healing, spiritual cleansing rituals, and yoga practices. These, integrated with modern healthcare, can complement the procedure. Collaboration between AYUSH institutions and regional universities can create hybrid healing packages. Destinations such as the Kamakhya Temple, Umananda Island, and Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra are serving as cultural and spiritual additions to healing. Participation in local rituals, river cruises, and art can foster holistic well-being rather than a mere medical procedure, not only for patients but also for their companions (Brooks, 2012).

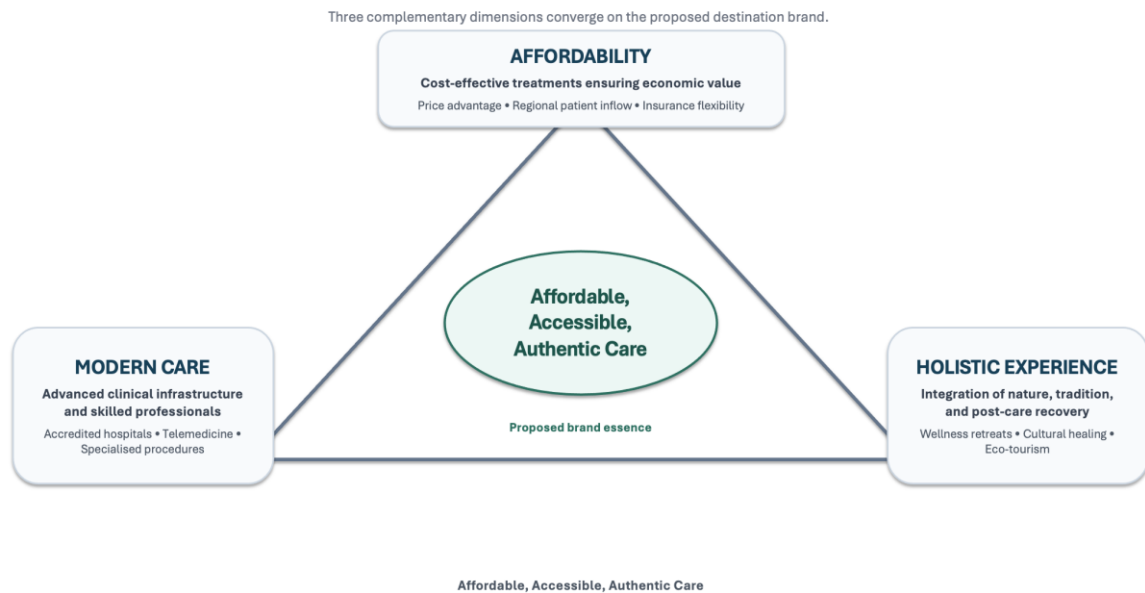
Experiential positioning can be made as "Recover naturally, where modern medicine meets the spirit of the Brahmaputra." This dimension extends Guwahati's appeal from curative medicine to transformative healing. This can be a key differentiator for Guwahati in global medical tourism.

6.6 The Medical Destination Positioning Triangle

To conceptualise the interconnectedness and interplay of these dimensions, a Medical Destination Positioning Triangle (MDPT) framework is proposed. It is a conceptual model describing how affordability, modern care, and holistic experience combine to create a distinctive medical tourism identity.

Figure 1: Conceptual representation of the Medical Destination Positioning Triangle, showing the interconnection among Affordability, Modern Care, and Holistic Experience with 'Affordable, Accessible, Authentic Care' at the centre.)

Figure 1. Guwahati Healthcare Brand Essence



Source: Author's own work

Table 2: Conceptual description of Figure 1

Vertex Dimension	Core Proposition	Example Attributes
Affordability	Cost-effective treatments ensuring economic value	Price advantage, regional patient inflow, and insurance flexibility.
Modern Care	Advanced clinical infrastructure and skilled professionals,	Accredited hospitals, telemedicine, specialised procedures.
Holistic Experience	Integration of nature, tradition, and post-care recovery	Wellness retreats, cultural healing, and eco-tourism

At the centre of the triangle lies Guwahati's proposed brand essence: "Affordable, Accessible, Authentic Care."

Source: Author's own work

7. The Destination Positioning Framework

The framework is based on the assumption that successful medical-tourism destinations combine three essential forces that are functional enablers (affordability, accessibility, quality infrastructure), symbolic amplifiers (branding, cultural narrative, image building) and experiential enhancers (wellness integration, patient experience design, local engagement). Since medical tourism destination choice not only rely on clinical capacity but also by accessibility, accreditation, doctor's expertise, medical technology, cultural understanding and destination communication channels (Zhong & Chan, 2024). These interact within a policy ecosystem shaped by governance, partnerships, and sustainability. The framework lies in strengthening the functional capabilities that make Guwahati an efficient and affordable healthcare destination.

7.1 Healthcare Infrastructure Development and Traditional Knowledge Integration

Investment in healthcare facilities is required to meet international expectations of quality and hygiene. Staff Training programs under the Skill India Mission can create professionalism, ensuring empathy, discretion, and cultural sensitivity, since perceived clinical quality, including doctors' expertise, medical treatment quality, and pre- and post-treatment consultation, is a major consideration in destination choice (Biswas & Rai, 2022).

Also integration of AYUSH and traditional knowledge can create a holistic experience. Guwahati can pioneer hybrid healing centres combining allopathic/homoeopathic and other types of surgeries with medicine with AYUSH therapies, local herbal pharmacology, and traditional diets as an available option for patients. Collaboration with Gauhati Medical College and Assam Ayurveda College could institutionalise evidence-based integrative medicine and strengthen trust in traditional medicine.

7.2 Accessibility and Affordability

Guwahati's gateway image and advantage are based on accessibility. Enhancements to LGBI Airport, expanded air links with Dhaka, Kathmandu, and Yangon, and completion of Asian Highway corridors can significantly improve patient inflows. Availability of medical visa facilitation desks at ports of entry would streamline the procedure. Economic value or cost advantage is one of Guwahati's biggest advantages. Government policy could introduce some incentives or pricing schemes for foreign patients from SAARC countries. Hospitals can partner with travel agencies to offer packages including accommodation, transfers, and interpreters that replicate successful Thai models (Heung et al., 2010). It is already being done by companies like Top Indian Holidays, Surgery Tours in India, operating in states like Rajasthan, South Indian States and others.

7.3 Digital Information Infrastructure and Marketing

The Digital India framework can contribute to supporting online appointment systems, multilingual tele-consultations, and AI-driven health record management. Such integration enhances transparency, reduces waiting times, it increases the level of awareness, trust and satisfaction in customers, especially for those travelling overseas. (Banerjee et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2011). The proposed umbrella identity "Gateway to Healing" must be embedded across marketing materials, government campaigns, and hospital communication. Symbols such as the Brahmaputra River, Kamakhya Temple, and Assamese silk motifs should be reinforced as a fusion of tradition and modernity. Creation of SEO-optimised content, virtual hospital tours, and patient testimonials can also be created to increase awareness and trust in patients' minds. Guwahati can participate in

medical-tourism roadshows in Dhaka, Thimphu, and Yangon. Collaboration with Indian missions abroad for health diplomacy and airline tie-ups for discounted medical-travel fares can be added recommendation.

7.4 Cultural and Ecological Immersion

Recovery retreats near Kaziranga National Park, Majuli Island, or Meghalaya's eco-villages can form "healing circuits." These experiences align with global trends where patients seek restorative environments (Hartwell, 2014). Local artisans and communities benefit from parallel cultural tourism.

7.4 Governance and Policy

Government ministries, tourism authorities and investment agencies should jointly develop medical tourism strategies, policies and investment frameworks. (Johnston et al., 2015; Zaeri & Maleki, 2018). A Guwahati Medical Tourism Council (GMTC) could be made involving: Government departments (Tourism, Health, AYUSH), Hospital associations, Travel and hospitality sectors, and Academic and research institutions. The GMTC can supervise or keep a check on standards, marketing, and international partnerships, ensuring strategic coherence. Key policy incentives could include medical-tourism visa liberalisation (extension of Ayush and e-medical visas), tax incentives for hospitals serving international patients. Subsidies for accreditation and technology adoption for hospitals and development of health and wellness zones. Such measures align with the national Heal in India framework while promoting growth. PPP models can fill in infrastructure and technological gaps by inviting private participation in diagnostic centres, accommodation, and air-ambulance services (Heung et al., 2010). The Assam Industrial Investment Corporation (AIIDC) can offer low-interest loans for wellness-infrastructure development. Given Guwahati's proximity to the SAARC and ASEAN regions, bilateral health agreements and cross-border patient-transfer protocols can facilitate seamless regional medical travel (Bookman & Bookman, 2007). Soft-power diplomacy through medical exchanges can strengthen India's regional role.

7.5 Community Engagement and Local Benefits

Medical tourism creates opportunities for locals in nursing, hospitality, logistics, and cultural guiding. Vocational institutes can further integrate "medical-tourism management" courses for services needed apart from medical procedures to the patients, like type of accommodation, vehicle, etc.

Involving local healers, artisans, and musicians in wellness experiences brings in cultural heritage that the medical tourists experience. Authenticity or a fusion of medical and culture is a differentiator for Guwahati from generic medical hubs. All wellness and retreat facilities should

follow sustainable norms, waste-management protocols, and water conservation measures to maintain ecological balance along the Brahmaputra valley and ensure that the development is holistic and sustainable.

8. Academic Contributions

This paper extends literature on destination positioning through theory-based combinations of Kotler's price-quality strategy, Echtner & Ritchie's Image Framework, and Experience Economy, to provide an integrative model for medical-tourism destinations. The Study provides adapted versions of destination positioning theory and strategy to a secondary city context. The Study demonstrates how secondary cities can become differentiated medical-tourism hubs. The study expands the scope of medical-tourism research from functional and symbolic dimensions to experiential dimensions, with holistic healing, Traditional knowledge, and environmental engagement. This study presents testable propositions (functional, symbolic, experiential), as proposed in the study, to guide future empirical research on patient perception, satisfaction, and loyalty.

8.1 Practical Implications

The framework has direct applications or recommendations for policymakers, healthcare providers, and tourism operators. For Policymakers, these would include investments in infrastructure; in connecting (i.e., roads, railroads etc.); and in accreditation system. Policymakers could develop policies to allow for cross-border medical visas; regional cooperation; and promote unified branding under the 'Gateway to Healing' sub brand as it relates to building identity for Guwahati. For Healthcare Providers, the recommendations are that AYUSH & traditional therapies be integrated into modern medical treatment; bundled packages that combine hospitalization, wellness, and cultural experiences. The Framework is also applicable to tourism/hospitality operators in terms of designing post-treatment recovery experiences and integrating natural landscapes/cultural sites. It is also suggested that staff receive training in medical tourism specific hospitality and cross-cultural sensitivity; and collaborate with hospitals and travel agencies to provide a holistic experience for tourists.

9. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Conceptual foundations lead to several limitations for this study. There is no empirical evidence validating this conceptual framework. It is theoretically developed and needs testing using both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative methods (surveys; patient case studies). A second

limitation is that it is geographically limited to Guwahati and Northeast India. Although it has been applied to other secondary cities as well, there could be additional contextual factors affecting the transferability. As the demand for medical travel is highly responsive to political, economic, and regulatory changes, the tracking of cross-border patient flow trends and competitors' strategies will need to occur continuously. Empirical studies assessing patients' opinions of their experiences with care in Guwahati would serve as a future direction of research. An example of an empirical study would be to assess the positive or negative impacts of regional medical tourism on the local community economically. Comparative studies regarding developing secondary cities in India and South Asia would also provide additional value by increasing the generalizability of this study.

10. Conclusion

The conceptual exploration presented in this paper demonstrates that Guwahati possesses the latent potential to emerge as a distinctive medical-tourism hub in Northeast India. By highlighting affordable, high-quality medical care, a gateway symbolic identity, and holistic experiential offerings, the city can differentiate itself from conventional metropolitan medical destinations.

The Medical Destination Positioning Triangle and Destination Positioning Framework provide a comprehensive roadmap for policymakers, healthcare providers, and tourism stakeholders, emphasising the integration of functional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions. The “Gateway to Healing” sub-brand encapsulates Guwahati’s essence, connecting modern medical science with cultural authenticity, ecological wellness, and regional connectivity.

Adopting this framework could yield multiple benefits, like enhanced patient inflows from South and Southeast Asia. It can lead to economic growth and employment generation through sustainable utilisation of natural and cultural assets. It will eventually establish Guwahati as a regional exemplar of integrative medicine with holistic healing.

Ultimately, Guwahati’s emergence as a Gateway to Healing aligns with broader national goals of inclusive, decentralised medical tourism development, positioning Northeast India as both a healthcare hub and a cultural-wellness destination on the global stage.

11. Declaration of AI use

While preparing this article, the authors made use of AI tools, specifically Quillbot and Grammarly, solely for the purposes of language enhancement, grammatical correction, and clarity improvement in the development of this research article. These instruments did not aid in the construction of the conceptual framework, data examination, or interpretation of results. The academic content, research methodology, evaluation, and the findings presented in the article are exclusively

attributable to the authors' individual endeavours. The author examined and refined the material generated and assume complete accountability for the precision and authenticity of every facet of the manuscript.

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