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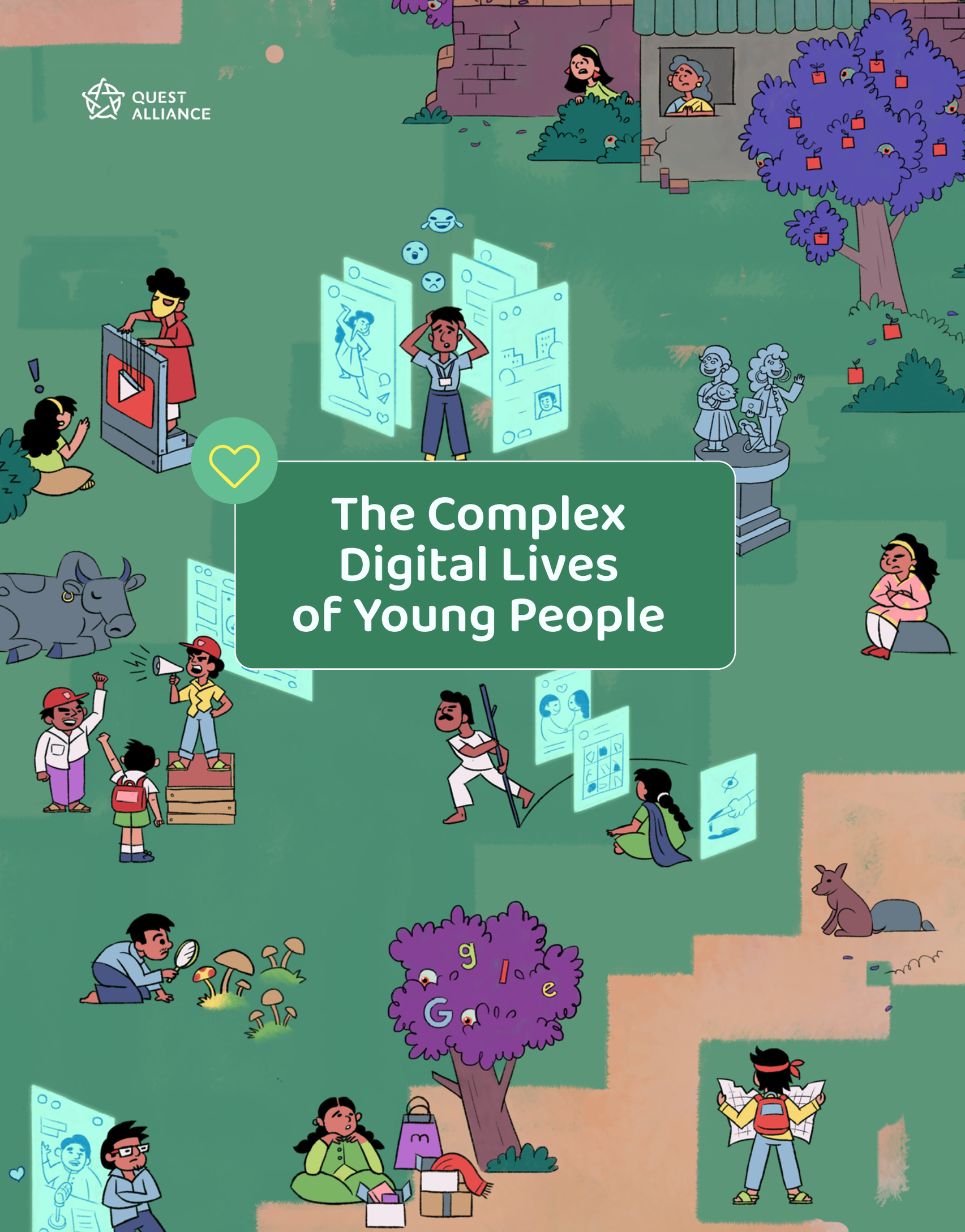

The Complex Digital Lives of Young People

To all the young
inhabitants of
digital maidan

PRELUDE

Is Social Media a Public space?

Starting off as avenues to connect with immediate and long lost friends, social media platforms have emerged and evolved beyond idle distraction and recreation. Over time, they have become critical centers for knowledge exchange, influence, livelihood and impact. Much like any public space, they brim with disinformation, isolation in echo chambers, hate speech and polarisation, while also serving as domains for learning, connection, self-expression and aspiration formation. These behaviours may not be specific to social media alone, but are definitely exacerbated[1] by it.

Social media today functions as a digital maidan, a vast and emotionally charged public space where young people gather to learn, socialize, express themselves, seek belonging, and imagine their futures. Over the past decade, rapid internet penetration, cheaper smartphones, and the proliferation of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp have transformed the everyday lives of young Indians. For many, the line between their digital and offline worlds have blurred. It is where they live, build relationships, develop aspirations, negotiate restrictions, and construct their identities.

The Digital Maidan of India's Youth - Ears to the Ground

Our understanding of young people's digital lives in India has largely been shaped by two dominant narratives:

1. The first imagines youth as **digital natives** - people who are inherently savvy, naturally fluent in technology, and effortlessly navigating the online world.
2. The second imagines them as **at risk** - people who are vulnerable to addiction, misinformation, online harm, and moral decline.

Both narratives are partial at best. They obscure the prevailing negotiations, cultural contexts, power structures, and emotional realities that shape young people's engagement with social media

1

Steinert, S., Marin, L., & Roeser, S. (2025). Feeling and thinking on social media: Emotions, affective scaffolding, and critical thinking. *Inquiry,* 68(1), 114–141.

2

Greenstein, M., & Franklin, N. (2020). Anger increases susceptibility to misinformation. Experimental Psychology 67 (3), 202–209.

Rationale Behind this Report: Why this? Why now?

This report seeks to move beyond the simplified frames mentioned so far. Drawing from in-depth field research across five states - Delhi, Haryana, Gujarat, Odisha, and Kerala, we explore how gender, class, caste, and family norms intersect with the architecture of social media platforms that shape young people's experiences online. We seek to demonstrate how young people are neither fully empowered, nor entirely vulnerable in the digital world. Instead, they demonstrate tactical agency - they learn to navigate restrictions, curate their online presence, build hidden or parallel digital identities, evaluate what they see, and negotiate risks and pleasures effortlessly.

That said, social media platforms are not neutral spaces. Algorithms shape visibility, attention, aspiration, and desire; they influence norms of femininity and masculinity, and they elevate some forms of self-expression while silencing others. Young people both influence, and are influenced by these systems. Their digital lives are spaces of belonging and learning, but also of judgement, comparison and surveillance.

By examining how young people consume content, form aspirations, express identity, seek community, and negotiate agency online, this report surfaces the complexity of digital youthhood in contemporary India.

It argues for moving beyond paternalistic, fear-driven approaches to media literacy, towards contextual, empathetic, and youth-centered frameworks that recognise young people as active meaning-makers in their digital environments.

Who is this report for?

This report is intended for people and institutions who work with young people in India, and are shaping the environments in which they learn, grow and participate. This includes:

- Educators and instructors in schools, colleges, ITIs and skilling centres;
- Organisations and practitioners in the youth development and civil society space;
- Counsellors, youth workers, and curriculum designers;
- Policymakers concerned with digital access, education, safety and wellbeing.
- It also speaks to researchers and scholars examining media, technology and youth cultures in the Global South.

By offering a grounded understanding of how young people actually navigate social media, across pleasure, aspiration, identity, safety and constraint, this report aims to support more empathetic, context-aware and youth-centred approaches to learning, media literacy and program design.


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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Public Arena of Social Media

Young people live on the internet; in a manner of speaking. As a generation that has been raised in the aftermath of the internet boom, the digital realm has become an inalienable part of their lives. Online practices of these young digital natives have evolved differently when compared to their older counterparts.

Over 50% of Indians are active internet users now, and the number is expected to reach 900 million by 2025. In 2024, the internet penetration rate in India reached 55%, with the active internet user base continuing to expand rapidly. Thus, making India one of the world's largest digital markets and highest consumers of online content.[3] The surge in social media access in India came after WhatsApp was acquired by Facebook in 2014, which accelerated its nation-wide penetration. This was further solidified by the launch of Reliance Jio networks in September 2016 - providing internet access to the remotest parts of the country. The COVID-19 pandemic further changed people's relationship with media and technology. Overnight, everything learning included, moved indoors. Multitudes of young people received access to the internet for the first time, because of schools moving online. This, in turn, transformed the reality in which they live, learn and grow.

As the internet is reshaping the lives of young people, it also gives rise to newer problems. Young people have become vulnerable to the risk of cyber abuse, bullying, and other forms of violence; raising concerns about their safety and privacy.

With varied levels of digital literacy, young people are inadvertently prone to encountering mis/disinformation. The personalized content stream that social media offers, often renders them in specific echo chambers distorting their realities.

This has increased their trust in the information they find online, while decreasing it in other sources of knowledge dissemination, including educational institutions. Scholars like Devina Sarwatay have already spoken about how media and technology are challenging the very foundations of education[4].

Considerable academic literature on the interaction of the marginalized with the internet, focuses on the utility of digital media for work and learning purposes, dismissing the full lives that the young lead digitally. **In this context, Payal Arora lays bare how any digital interventions implemented on the ground, run on the deep-seated worldview of the poor and the marginalized as utility-driven beings, who have not earned leisure. And hence should only use digital devices for work. But the truth is that 'pleasure is at the forefront of digital life' for all.**[5]

3

IAMAI. (2024). Internet in India 2024.

4

Sarwatay, D., Raman, U., & Ramasubramanian, S. (2021) Media literacy, social connectedness, and digital citizenship in India: Mapping stakeholders on how parents and young people navigate a social world. Frontiers in Human Dynamics, 3, 2673-2726.

5

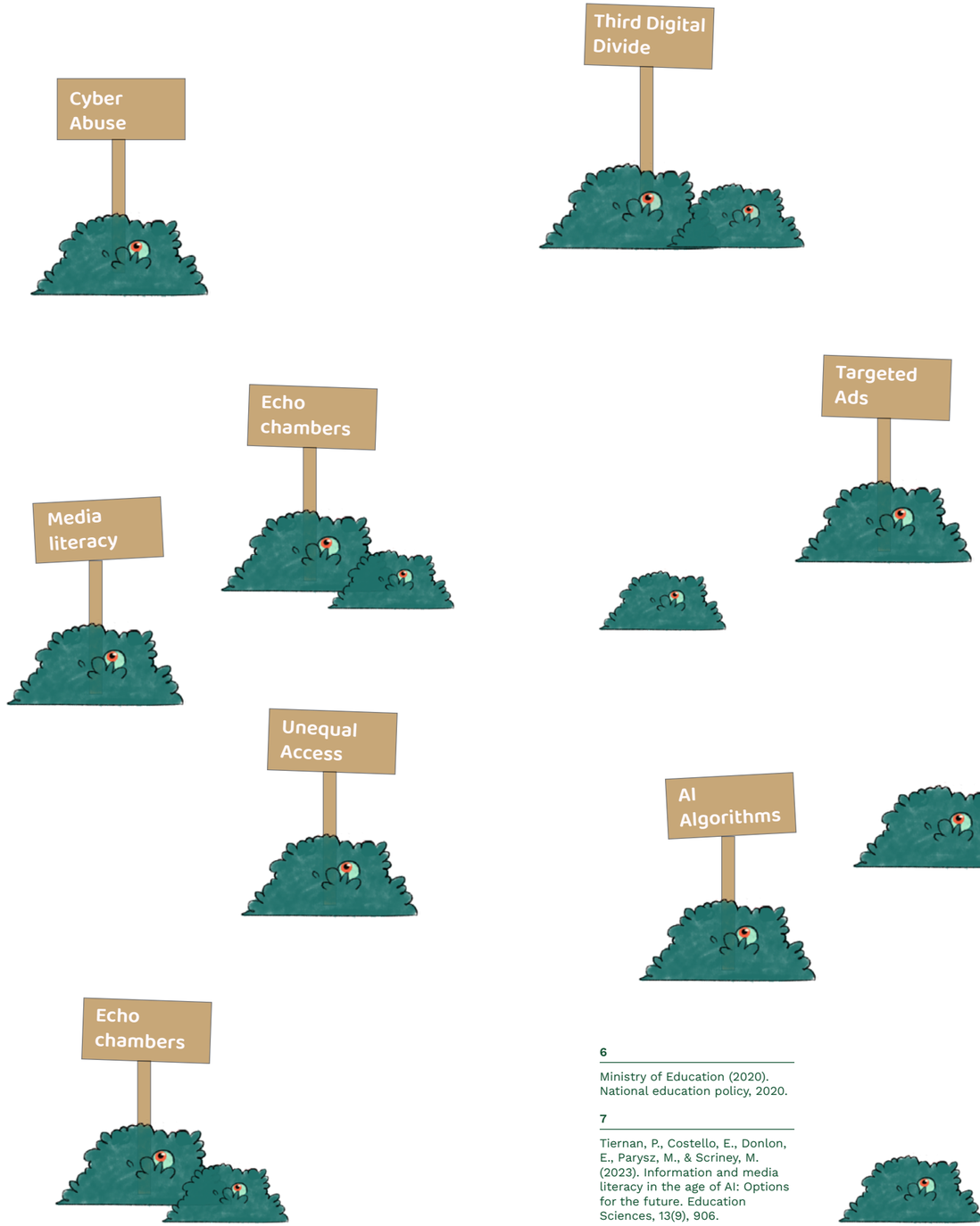
Arora, P. (2019). The next billion users: Digital life beyond the West. Harvard University Press.

After the bursting of the bubble that access to the internet can solve the complex issues of the marginalized, a two-tier definition of digital divide was proposed:

1. The first tier addresses access to internet infrastructure, whereas
2. The second tier addresses the differences in individuals' online skills.

Payal Arora proposes a third digital divide, the difference in access, intent and use of digital leisure time which shapes people's digital lives. The understanding of young people's digital lives in India has been top-down and paternalistic. The increasing percolation of digital access to the young, has given rise to technopanics among those who are concerned with increased dependency and the negative impacts of digital media. This also disproportionately affects the marginalized youth, especially young women who have to negotiate for their right to digital presence from their elder male family members. Therefore, it becomes imperative to look at the digital lives of the young through the lens of the digital leisure divide and to locate their digital lives within the sphere of leisure.

The United Nations has recognized "access to the internet" as a human right. As we see increased adoption in a context like India, associated skilling that aids young people in interacting critically with it, becomes an imperative. Effective media literacy adapted for the 20th century, essentially. Scholars define it as, "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms." The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), while choosing to not deliberately define it, calls it a "composite concept that encompasses different definitions of information literacies." In the National Education Policy of 2020,[6] there is no explicit mention of media literacy, but it includes "digital literacy, coding, and computational thinking" as part of essential skills. Digital media has become an indispensable part of public and private lives, urging scholars to call media literacy a human right.



The DigiComp 2.2, a digital competence framework, on which many media literacy pedagogies and curricula are based, lays out five competence areas for responsible digital interaction:
1. Information and data literacy
2. Communication and collaboration
3. Digital content creation
4. Safety
5. Problem solving

It's pertinent to note that media literacy scholarship focusing on youth, mostly revolves around WEIRD contexts (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic), with many scholars calling for a more contextual understanding from the Global South. Stark digital realities exist in India (defined by gender, caste and class), and they merit a contextualized development of media literacy within the subcontinent.

While the levels of media literacy in young people remain low, recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) pose a significant challenge to our understanding of what it means to be information/media literate. E-commerce and social media among others, filter "relevant" content for their users. Social media, arguably, uses one of the most sophisticated forms of AI, as part of their recommendation systems: 'algorithms' where they analyze a user's history and trends. In addition to curating personalized feeds, AI is used to detect patterns in individuals' online behavior to deliver highly targeted and personalized ads that anticipates users' wants and needs. It has radically transformed how humans seek, access, filter and consume information and changed the very nature of what information is.[7] With the emergence of ChatGPT and other AI chatbots, it becomes imperative to explore the level of understanding and awareness that young people have about the digital world, that is increasingly becoming omnipresent in their lives.

In this context, where the internet and digital technology are becoming extensions of people's lives, it is important to understand how young people from different contexts are experiencing this digital world. What are youth digital practices in contemporary India, and how do they vary across social locations?

6
Ministry of Education (2020). National education policy, 2020.

7
Tiernan, P., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Parysz, M., & Scriney, M. (2023). Information and media literacy in the age of AI: Options for the future. Education Sciences, 13(9), 906.

How Indian Youth use Social Media

A Contemporary Take

While the global scholarship on social media usage is important to understand the larger trends and usage patterns, the specificities of the Indian context including the cultural, linguistic, geographical differences, demands more locally grounded research. The historical marginalization of certain caste groups, the stark rural-urban divide, and the government policies, all have an important role to play in how different people engage with the digital platforms. For instance, even with the government's new initiatives to disseminate knowledge through digital technologies, the historically marginalized and underserved communities are still behind, when it comes to the ability to access and use these digital services.[8]

In developing countries such as India, the digital gender gaps tend to be larger, where women (particularly those who are poorer and from rural areas), continue to struggle with the use of digital tools and technology. Women are 26% less likely to own smartphones worldwide, and the differences in smartphone ownership escalate in South Asia (70%) and Africa (34%).[9] **The disparity between the genders can be linked mostly to an underestimation of technical skills by women, low self-confidence, lack of exposure, socio-cultural norms, and existing power dynamics.**

The gendered division of labour adds to the digital divide. For instance, a study in rural India,[10] noted that apart from the engagement at school, girls' lives revolve around domestic work on most days. In contrast, boys wake up and go straight to school, or head to the fields. For girls, work is not a continuous activity. Instead, it occurs sporadically, and they often have "idle time" between "bursts" of activity. Most of their digital time is spent when they have downtime between housework. Their access to social circles is also limited, in comparison to boys.[11] When women are given access to technology, it becomes a gateway for them to expand their otherwise restricted social networks and agency. A survey conducted in the state of Kerala finds that most of the women agreed that the usage of mobile phones has increased women's social networks, made them feel more secure while travelling, increased their independence, made them feel comfortable in a public space, and allowed them to travel securely to faraway places. It should be noted that many of the participants felt that mobile phones have created 'new forms of romance in society.'[12]

However, there is only limited literature that unpacks how young Indians are experiencing the digital world. Most of the literature focuses on the impacts of social media, while very few have attempted to move away from a top-down perspective to understand how the younger 'digital natives' negotiate their identities and relationships (both online, offline). Sarwatay and Raman in their study,[13] explored how youth negotiate access to digital media and arrive at distinct usage behaviours. Absence of personal devices, limited time, parental guided sessions, parents' profile or information, are some key determinants of their social lives. These shape how they represent themselves and connect to their peers even when regularly monitored by elders.

8

Thakkar, S., Miller, P., Palackal, A., & Shrum, W. (2022). Internet and mobile use: Exploring the gendered digital divide in Kerala. Loyola Journal of Social Sciences, 36(2).

9

ibid

10

Kumar, A., Tewari, A., Shroff, G., Chittamuru, D., Kam, M., & Canny, J. (2010). An exploratory study of unsupervised mobile learning in rural India.

11

ibid

12

Thakkar, S., Miller, P., Palackal, A., & Shrum, W. (2022). Internet and mobile use: Exploring the gendered digital divide in Kerala. Loyola Journal of Social Sciences. 36(2).

13

Sarwatay, D., & Raman, U., (2022). Everyday negotiations in managing presence: Young people and social media in India. Information, Communication & Society, 25(4), 536-551.

Many young people in India deal with high volumes of media on a daily basis, and popular usage includes video consumption. They increasingly have direct or indirect access to social media, but they interact with technology in specific social and cultural ways, as opposed to their peers in the Global North, as indicated by scholar Devina Sarwatay.[14] The current YouTube user base in India stands at 476 million users, of which more than half are young people. It is estimated to reach 859.26 million users, and therefore will hit a new peak in 2029. Social media is increasingly constructing young people's realities. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2024, reveals that over 30% of teenagers who cannot read a paragraph of text are capable of browsing the internet, and over 50% can find a video on YouTube.[15]

Beyond just consumption, youth these days use social media platforms to promote themselves, and seek to monetise their personalities through business transactions. The commodification of their everyday lives and activities is available on platforms for their followers and subscribers to view and interact with. This fuels the consumption of products they are selling or promoting. Expanding online presence may also lead to their increased exposure to abuse online, and render them vulnerable to other perils of fame. But the youth have their own way to resolve these. Many keep their focus on scaling up their platform presence, growing follower counts, and creating multiple accounts across platforms. While others prefer using pseudonyms, private profiles, and even absent/hidden faces in profile pictures to make them feel safe online.[16]

But online presence and navigation can also be very gendered, as Bhatia et al. find in their ethnographic study on young girls in rural India.[17] They have proposed a framework, "quotidian playful resilience (QPR)" to identify and theorise the strategies that girls undertake, in order to negotiate with the existing norms they contend with. Many young users (mostly girls) follow the practice of creating anonymous/personal hidden social media accounts, in order to keep up with their surroundings (friends, or otherwise) while maintaining privacy. However, they tend to restrict their accounts from secular, modern, urban women, and from gender neutral spaces. This is indicative of how patriarchy interacts with social and religious class. Their conduct in digital spaces, even unsupervised, follows the dominant, socially acceptable/conditioned, and internalized ideas of women's presence in public spaces.

The idea of agency is often narrowed down to larger political actions, or to victimhood. However, it is important to understand that an individual's agency can be seen in their day-to-day activities, and may be visible or invisible in their digital media actions. It can be seen in the distributed process of access, negotiated participation, and social surveillance. For instance, access to information or resources can be understood through shared connectivity, collective ownership, as well as navigating alternative strategies for device usage.[18]

Another study by Ghosh et al.[19] on social media usage among young boys and girls in Delhi also identified tactics such as 'safeguarding their interests' or 'bypassing restrictions' that young girls use to navigate through the controls on their digital presence.

14

Sarwatay, D., Raman, U., & Ramasubramanian, S. (2021) Media literacy, social connectedness, and digital citizenship in India: Mapping stakeholders on how parents and young people navigate a social world. Frontiers in Human Dynamics, 3, 2673-2726.

15

ASER Centre. (2024). ASER 2023 'Beyond Basics' - Rural.

16

Sarwatay, D., & Raman, U., (2022). Everyday negotiations in managing presence: Young people and social media in India. Information, Communication & Society, 25(4), 536-551.

17

Bhatia, K. V., Arora, P., & Pathak-Shelat. M. (2021) Good girls don't go online: Unpacking the quotidian playful resilience influencing girls' social and digital engagements. International Journal of Communication, 15, 4755–4773.

18

ibid

The study found that much of the usage among young users is for social media and gaming. Here too, it detected gendered patterns in usage as well as the content being consumed. While across genders apps like WhatsApp, Instagram and Youtube were more commonly used, boys used apps like Snapchat more for chatting, while girls' usage was largely for offline purposes like photo filters.[19] A similar study based in Haryana highlighted that girls mostly used these platforms to post pictures and text (content), followed by updating status and sharing reels. About 78% of the participants, both urban and rural, regularly posted content on these platforms. It was found that the rural participants spent more time on social media platforms, compared to their urban counterparts. The study also reflected that 52% of urban and 34% of rural participants engaged in late night browsing, indicative of the extensive time use on social media.[20]

Such studies bring to the forefront the need to look beyond the normative way of understanding digital engagements, which centers on the utilitarian notions of the development paradigm, and which is delimited to the purpose of education, health, or for better employment.[21]

Beyond the surface-level engagements, there is a need to analyse digital behaviour from the intersection of class, gender and socio-cultural norms. Digital leisure is a key driver of technology adoption and adaptation. Bhatia et al. argue against the idea that the usage of technology among the global poor is only limited to socio-economic empowerment.[22] Rather, they are more likely to use the internet for practical purposes than the urban rich. Digital leisure, however, provides an interesting lens to see how class and gender influence children and young people's digital engagement.

Much scholarship on youth's interaction with media and information in India is limited to the urbanized 'middle-class' youth, who are disproportionately represented, even in fiction. This category is widely generalized, and has given rise to myths about media consumption patterns among the 'Indian youth'. The question of the 'other side', largely remains unanswered - how are the working class and neo-middle class youth changing their habits with respect to media and its consumption? How is it informing their realities? Would they be classified as digital natives or have their digital lives evolved differently than their middle class counterparts?

19

Ghosh, A. S., & Reja, C. (2025). Gender and smartphone app access, use and control among youth: A case study of Kalyanpuri, Delhi. Institute of Social Studies Trust.

20

Dave, V. (2025). Social media use and its impact on women: a study of Haryana. Pancasila International Journal of Applied Social Science. 3(3), 404-418.

21

Bhatia, K. V., Arora, P., & Pathak-Shelat. M. (2021) Good girls don't go online: Unpacking the quotidian playful resilience influencing girls' social and digital engagements. International Journal of Communication, 15, 4755–4773.

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Through our research and engagement with young people, we uncovered *six* ●●●●●● distinct thematics through which young people experience, understand and inhabit the maidan of social media.

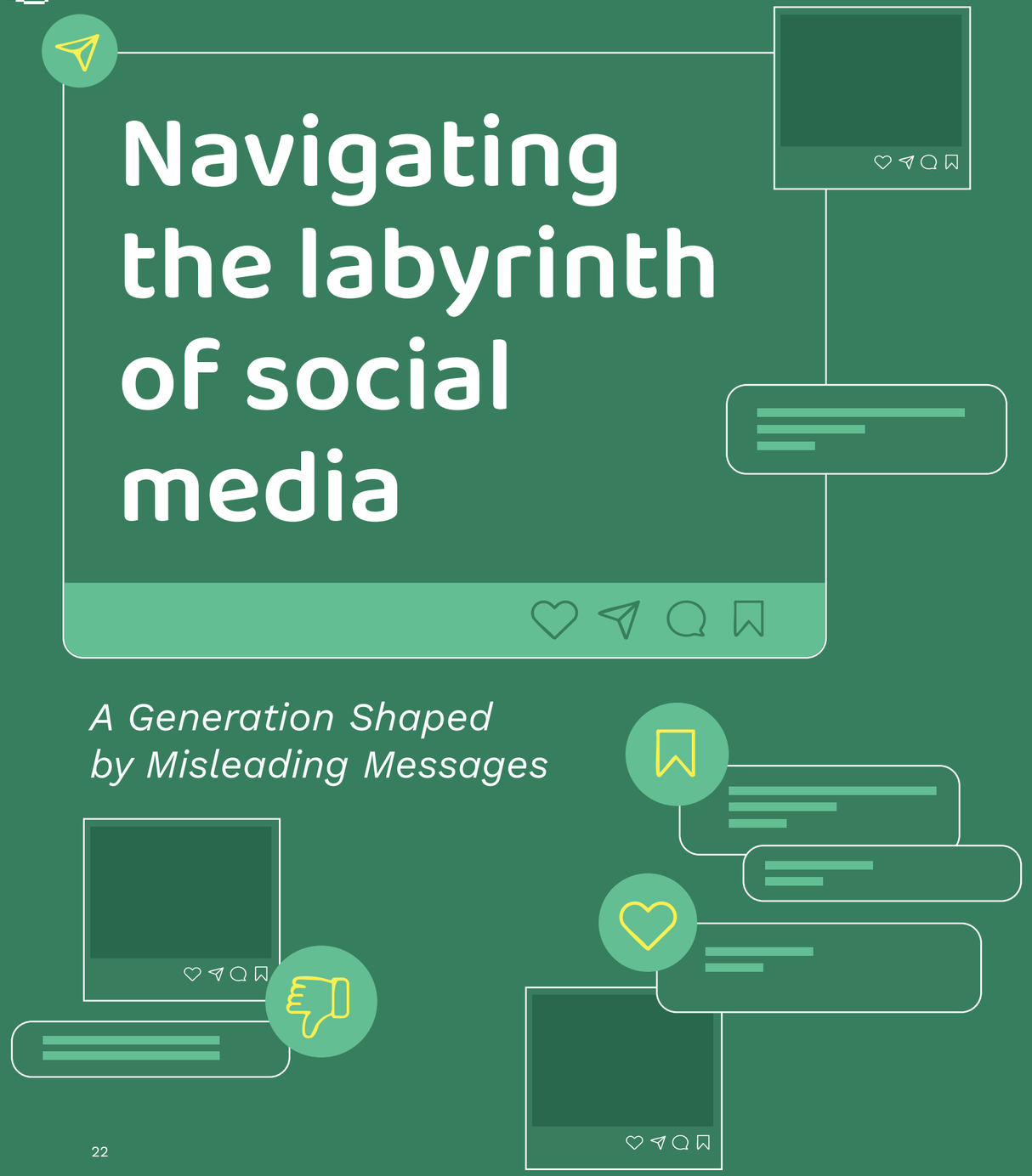
These six thematics become six distinct zones of the maidan where young people interact with and make-meaning of their digital lives.

In the following sections, you will see how young people navigate the labyrinth of social media, how they learn from YouTube University, how they exercise tactical digital agency, how they use the internet as a lighthouse for the imperfect world-of-work, how they co-create their digital identities with algorithms, and how they socialise in digital spaces.

ZONE 1

Navigating the labyrinth of social media

A Generation Shaped by Misleading Messages



When Saloni and her classmates said they would delete their post on Instagram if someone comments inappropriately on it, Riya's sudden counter to that was

> Why? I will just abuse them

Riya seemed slightly more unrestricted and risk-taking in an online space compared to a lot of other young girls we met her age.

Both the young girls we met in Delhi - Riya and Saloni, are pursuing a course in fashion design and technology at an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) close to their homes. Riya gravitated to it early on, when she started stitching clothes for women in her neighborhood to make some extra money. She learnt the skill from her older sister who she looks up to. She continues this side hustle even to this day, as her father does not allow her to take up a part-time job outside the house. She aspires to open her own fashion boutique store in the future, where she can sell designer clothes at affordable prices. She believes financial independence to be of utmost importance for any girl, at her age. She believes this has given her the leverage to negotiate space within her family; to be able to say no to marriage, to pursue education, to seek permission for everyday activities etc.

Saloni also dreams of being a self-reliant woman. She is inspired by reels on Instagram that show an independent woman's life. She is devotionally-inclined and loves to listen to Bhakti songs on her phone. She also stays in a neighbourhood close to Riya's. Having grown up with a younger and an older brother at home, she relies on them to get certain things done. For example, her older brother recharges her phone sometimes, using her money. Although she knows how to do it herself, she feels it has become a habit now. She says,

> There is a kind of stubbornness right. You have done it all this while, you should keep doing it.

Similarly, all the other family members including her parents and brothers rely on her to get things done at home. During her leisure time, all the siblings, and sometimes their neighbors and friends sit together and watch movies, downloaded by her brother on a stolen WiFi network. She says that most of the people around her don't pay for the WiFi connection, because stealing it is much easier. Although, she doesn't herself know how to do this and entirely depends on her brothers to get it done. Riya has observed the boys in her neighbourhood do this too. She says that they easily figure out passwords on a pirated website on Google Chrome.

Today is a Sunday. After a very busy week of course assignments, Riya and Saloni have some free time for a bit of social media scrolling. Riya checks a few YouTube updates of accounts

she follows. Most of them are either fashion influencers, fashion designers or educators. She notices a new video update on a page she has subscribed to - Karishma Creations. She watches the entire video on how to design an interesting gown. She likes the video and bookmarks it for later, to try it out on her own or for a class assignment. She watches many such videos to improve her design and stitching skills.

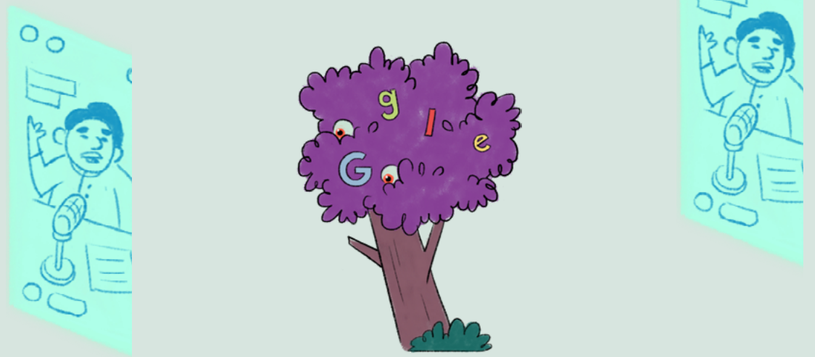
As she is scrolling through YouTube, she gets a notification on her Instagram. One of her friends has shared a funny reel about a Vada Pav vendor in Delhi setting up a stall on a busy road, in a location that was not permitted by the city police. The second half of the video is about him picking up unnecessary scuffles with the traffic police when asked to vacate. Ignoring the funny connotation to the reel, Riya was more concerned about the kind of violent behaviour this promotes. As this particular vendor had suddenly become famous gaining thousands of followers on social media by glorifying violence and public misbehavior, his content was reaching a lot more audience. She read a comment under the reel that said,

> @ig_commenter_123
> **They don't study, they just keep doing such things.**

She feared that such content would influence young people negatively.

She often sees boys in her neighborhood and ITIs talking rudely and getting into fights. She believes boys her age are being influenced by similar content they watch online, put out by famous influencers like Elvish Yadav, Thara Bhai Jogindar. Content creators who glorify and promote such toxic masculinity are influencing young people's behaviour. She has seen that this influence extends to girls too. Some think such an attitude is cool in a boy and expect that in their partners as well. She feels that they will realize how wrong it is, only if something bad happened to them. All of this in turn makes Riya's and Saloni's life difficult. They always need to be wary of such behaviour in boys their age.

Both of them see such behaviour influencing interactions even on social media platforms. When Saloni scrolls through her Instagram she usually watches reels related to devotional songs, bollywood songs, make-up and motivational quotes. Today as she is scrolling she comes across a reel of a boy applying makeup. She likes the reel and goes on to check the comment section to read the top comments. While she did anticipate it, she is angered by the trolling that she read on the post, most of which seemed to be from male accounts. She believes men do not want to accept anything that may be normatively different, and end up resorting to bullying online. She feels everyone should have the freedom to express themselves. Riya thinks people don't give much thought to commenting, because social media makes othering people easier, consequences notwithstanding. She has observed that this extends beyond gender to other considerations like a person's skin color, their accent, their clothing etc.



Both Riya and Saloni are mindful of what they consume online. They are especially troubled by the violent behaviour of men on social media. Additionally, Saloni gets frustrated when any bad content shows up on her feed. She often ends up reporting content that involves suggestive dance moves by girls or women in short clothes, or reels with slurs or inappropriate romantic displays of couples. She believes girls who put such content online are 'bad women' and people, especially girls should not be watching content of this nature. She also believes that when girls post online, they should be decently dressed, and not attract unwanted attention.

Both the young girls look up to influencers online who talk about, and portray the life of a modern self-dependent woman. One such influencer Saloni follows is Dimple Malhan. She admires the capabilities of this influencer who she considers an independent woman capable of having a full time career, while being an influencer, and a caretaker for her family. She aspires to be able to do all these things in her future. Similar to Saloni, a lot of young girls we came across looked up to such influencers as role models. With all the restrictions they face at home, such influencers online give them hope for alternate possible lifestyles for them in the future - an omnipotent, modern, super-woman.

Many of these girls have built a strong moralistic perception of what they consider is ideal behaviour and good content online, and prefer to operate within those boundaries. They consider the indoctrination of boys towards toxic masculinity to be a threat to gender and society. They also realize how these platforms are influencing boys in taking up behaviour that may be violent or rude. While being cognizant of the harms of online spaces, these girls do not realise the influence and impact of social media in shaping their own thoughts and behaviour. They are influenced by a certain "good woman" narrative that dismisses every woman on the internet who doesn't fit within it. Similarly, they are also being influenced by a distinct aspiration to become a modern independent superwoman, without realizing that they are reinforcing the status quo.

While the girls expressed their concerns about boys becoming indoctrinated into toxic masculinity, boys in the other room spoke about the emotional fluctuations they experience, because of the constant barrage of shortform content that they encounter on a daily basis. They believe that short reels are deliberately designed as such to ensure the user does not have time to reflect and critically analyse the information being presented to them. But as they say this, they also recognise its benefits, as it fits neatly into their hectic lifestyles (where they cannot spare hours to watch long explainer videos or movies).

If young people feel a sense of helplessness at the convincing power of social media content while simultaneously trusting that platforms are fundamentally good, what happens to their capacity for independent thought and meaning-making? Especially so, when technology becomes not just a content curator but an intimate companion making them believe that it knows them better, than they know themselves?

SUB PART 1

Consuming Content or Consuming Worldviews?

Young people are constantly engaging with digital content across different platforms, on a daily basis. Although some of it is intentional and for practical purposes, the majority of their screen time is meant for leisure. Leisure is at the forefront of their everyday digital interactions. They meander through these spaces seeking stimulation and relaxation. They are actively navigating their offline lives to balance and manage their leisure time in digital spaces. And hence social media has become a demanding leisure activity for young people. With or without them realizing, this is influencing their lives in many ways, the way they view, think, and feel about different topics. This is also shaping their opinions about gender, communities, news, and politics. Although a few students are aware of this fact, most of them are completely oblivious to it.

Similar to leisure in physical spaces, digital leisure of young people is also highly gendered.[23] Some of the younger boys in schools who had unrestricted access to phones, spent up to two to four hours a day or almost all of their free time scrolling through social media. A school boy in Narmada, Gujarat said he stays on his phone, "...till the battery or data gets over." The opposite was true for school girls, where their duration of access to phones was limited, and heavily monitored. Girls were also expected to contribute to the household chores, leaving less time for them to engage in leisure activities online, as observed across all locations. School boys in Patthara, Odisha felt that in general, the boys in their village had greater phone usage than girls, "The kids sit under the trees and scroll on their mobiles." They mostly watch movies or cricket matches, "We don't know the name, we watch whatever looks good, Bollywood or otherwise."

For older students in ITIs especially in Delhi (where they have to multi-task daily), the amount of time they could spend on leisure is limited. For them, Instagram was replacing longer forms of entertainment content. As they cannot afford to spend hours watching movies, they choose to watch shorter reels that explain the movies instead. "For movies, we have to spend 1-2 hours, but only 15 seconds on Instagram. Like a trailer, it quickly shows the movie and we understand the plot. We don't need to watch the whole movie."

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Arora, P. (2019). The next billion users: Digital life beyond the West. Harvard University Press.

Content that harms Individuals or Communities

Young people are not just passively consuming content, but are actively navigating their presence online. Since social media has created isolated bubbles for its users, each young person in our study is navigating the content they encounter online, and is making sense of it in their own unique ways. Nonetheless, there are broader patterns when it comes to the kind of content that boys and girls consume. In the process of making sense of what they consume, they have also built perceptions of what content is good for them and what isn't. Social media is translating the gender stereotypes that actually exist in their offline lives, and amplifying it on social media platforms multi-folds.

Bad Women and Ganda (Bad) Content

Across geographies, dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity are being reproduced in public-facing social media. An individual's deviance from the norms can become an object of rumour and gossip, potentially resulting in shame and the ruin of the individual and their family's reputation.[24]

In our research, the "bad woman" narrative of the offline world translating into the online world among girls and boys alike, was starkly evident. Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha commented on the kinds of clothes that actresses wore and posted pictures of it online.

They believe that women should not be dressed in such indecent clothes or be uploading content like that on the internet to begin with

"The actresses wear such short clothes. Their dresses are almost translucent, and everything under them is visible."

Similarly girls in Narmada, Gujarat associate any content that compromises the honour of a woman as 'ganda content.' They gave examples of girls or couples posting romantic content or girls seen wearing indecent clothes.

"Girls make certain vlogs where their clothes are revealing, just like Urfi Javed."

In parallel, girls in Odisha also said that they watch content that provides advice on how to be a good woman, wife, "Girls should cook well and keep themselves covered all the time. A good wife feeds her husband well." Boys also displayed strong moralistic judgement of women online, if they didn't conform with the larger accepted narrative of 'the good girl'. They feel that girls do weird things online, far more than boys do, and this needs to be called out, "Girls who dance weirdly, chapri girls." Boys, unanimously in all states and across age groups, also felt that with the advent of influencer culture, it has become much easier for girls to get famous and earn money. But for them, these girls were not respectable.

24

Miller, D., Costa, E., & Haynes, N. (2016). How the world changed social media. UCL Press.

25

Hooper, V., & Kalidas, T. (2012). Acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on social networking sites: A study of the behavioural norms of youth on facebook. The Electronic Journal Information Systems Evaluation, 15(3), 259-268.

Boys Who Have Lost Their Minds

This judgement is not just limited to women but also to men who engage in activities that are considered effeminate in nature. Boys from an ITI in Mangolpuri, Delhi feel that people who put content which is different from the status quo deserve abuse,

> **"At least 10 percent among 100 boys are those who have lost their minds, LGBT types."**

Findings from other research indicate that there is greater clarity on what is unacceptable behaviour, rather than what is acceptable. Personal norms tend to be in play and majority consensus defines acceptable behaviour.[25] Although in our research it is true to some extent, the application of this is different for girls and boys, with little common ground. In digital spaces, girls are usually compassionate even if it involves other kinds of trolling that involves targeting an individual. Girls in Eriyad, Kerala shared an example of the kind content they come across online, of men trolling female content creators. Some of them strongly felt that this was inappropriate, ***"She publishes a lot of reels, and then there are all these men, dressed up as women, who troll her."*** But other girls differed when they said content creators had the freedom to put what they wanted online. Even if it involved mild trolling, it was not a problem so long as it's in good humour.

Boys target other boys who don't perform in accordance with normative gender norms online, while girls are more likely to feel compassionate towards someone being trolled. Girls at an ITI in Mangolpuri, Delhi felt that targeting a person's gender or appearance was not acceptable, even in digital spaces. They said men who troll or make negative comments disregard the feelings of those in question,

> **"You know those occasions where boys will be applying makeup, and they post that? People say the wrong stuff to them."**

The tendency of othering in a digital space is more prevalent among boys. They feel entitled to voice their opinions freely. A few ITI boys in Delhi proudly shared their comments on the content they dislike 'chapri content' (a derogatory slur to mock something tasteless or cringe), which often gets reported on Instagram,

"I randomly put comments like, "put them in jail, hang them.""

"Instagram alerts me by saying that my ID will be banned, and then I have to delete my comment."

This can perhaps be attributed to the lack of significant consequences for such behaviour, which leads boys to act in extreme, socially unacceptable ways.

Encountering news/facts with a trust deficit

Students consume content related to entertainment, education, facts, and news in tandem. This news consumption behaviour can be characterized as "incidental news." They encounter pieces of news all the time, but click on them only sporadically and spend little time engaging with the content. News then becomes undifferentiated from the rest of the content.[26]

Students across all our field sites had a trust deficit, and increased paranoia about the information they received online. They think all information is fake news. Their skepticism arose from the frequency of how much of it they encounter daily. Boys from an ITI in Eriyad, Kerala expressed their frustration when they said, "There is sometimes news on hartals, when there are no hartals happening." In other cases, certain topics were entirely dismissed as fake news if they presumed there was a higher probability for it to be untrue. ITI girls from Mangolpuri, Delhi said any awareness related content or celebrity topics should be considered as fake news by default.

Amidst all of this, both school and ITI students had their own ways of assessing, verifying or judging parts of news they would stumble upon on social media. But some students also exhibited a tendency to fall for fake news, which had a bearing on their lives. For example, school girls in Odisha were reluctant to consider the possibilities of careers online, as they feared that the internet might shut down one day. They based this on a piece of news they had stumbled upon online, "Someone said that the internet will shut down in 2025."

ITI girls in Mangolpuri, Delhi said that they were wary of small media houses, as they tend to exaggerate all kinds of news. They felt it was very important to cross check them on big media pages. Similarly, boys at an ITI in Haryana said that independent news reporters like Dhruv Rathee or Raunak make it difficult to know who was telling the truth. They sometimes have to cross check different profiles to assess this,

> **We will have to throw our arms and legs to figure out what is real and what is fake."**

But boys at an ITI in Delhi opined that in certain cases, it becomes completely impossible to verify real or fake news. They believed that short form content taken out of context could manipulate the facts and mislead people, ***"In short form content, like a 15 seconds reel, people watch it and move on. We are not shown the premise and aftermath of it."***

On the other hand, boys from Haryana felt that the internet gives information of all kinds - fake, real, positive and negative news, ***"We consume it based on our interest".*** They believed that the agency is with the consumers to choose what they watch.

Parallely, students in Narmada, Gujarat had their own way of assessing news.

> **Whatever is shown live, is true", said a boy.**

They complained that they received a lot of fake news related to road or fire accidents, and even natural disasters, which they believed were edited and repurposed clips from the past. Hence the biggest marker of them to assess, is whether the news being streamed on a platform is live or not. Judgement to assess the credibility of news is applied sometimes, but blindly trusted in other instances. For example, school boys in Patthara, Odisha said,

> **We have a belief system that, whatever Google (the search engine) says, is correct."**

They seemed to believe that Google doesn't show fake news, which indicates a certain amount of blind trust they associate with specific online platforms. Social media in general is seen as a propagator of fake news, but Google in particular is trusted as a credible source. Students from Haryana also exhibited an interesting behaviour where they trusted the 'system' to show "sahi (right) content". The 'system' being either the government or their elders who would not allow a piece of content to be available online, if considered incorrect or harmful to them.

The Logic of Fact Checking

School boys in Odisha were very confident in saying that they would never fall for mis/disinformation on YouTube. If they felt that some information on a YouTube channel was wrong - they quickly asked Google and verified it. Referring to their learnings from social media they said Gandhi was a spy of the British, and Nathuram Godse, on the other hand, was a common man just like them. They felt this piece of information was true, and did not merit cross-verification on Google. Students in Haryana also demonstrated a similar paradox. They spoke about a piece of news they encountered online to be fake because it didn't make sense, **"It was shown in the news that politicians collected donations amounting to Rs. 400 crore from beef exporting companies. It will probably be fake news."**

26 Boczkowski, P., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi. M. (2017). Incidental news: How young people consume news on social media.

Social Media's Effects: Influencing Behaviours of the Young

Young people are not just passive content consumers. They realise the effect that social media content may be having on them. They expressed concerns about social media influence - increased brainwashing that may cause aggression, dependence, and worries around how it may affect their education. Girls in Delhi felt that influencer culture is pushing young people to have unrealistic expectations,

"If they (influencers) own an iPhone, we think we should also have one. They try to motivate us slyly."

Growing Up With A 'Mindwashing' Machine

Boys from an ITI in Delhi felt that certain kinds of content they watch online are made to manipulate them. They sometimes avoid consuming it to not be manipulated. But they also realized that a lot of youth their age were easily getting influenced by whatever they were seeing online. They also expressed their concern that young children were more vulnerable and impressionable, as they did not have the right tools to engage critically with the internet,

"If we are watching something at a young age, we don't tend to delve deep into the content. For instance, there was a reel wherein a married man fell for another woman. That was wrong. But young people may not realise it."

"It is easy to convince someone to do something that they would never have done otherwise. It is easier to manipulate nowadays"

reflected a boy in an ITI in Delhi. Their constant use of social media has led young people to believe that it's a **'mindwashing machine.'** Boys at an ITI in Delhi said that manipulating people to do something has become a lot easier because of social media. They also expressed their concern as to how social media is also being used to mindwash people through religious propaganda,

"In recent times, it (mindwash) is prevalent among the youth. Sanatan Dharm has grown drastically, especially in Delhi. Earlier, it was not common, but now it has intensified to a great extent, leading to a change in one's mindset."

Boys in Haryana also believed that social media was making people more aggressive. They felt that if users were stuck watching similar content, it could lead to aggression. They also thought that this constant scrolling could also lead to severe boredom which drives people to engage with extreme political or violent content, "Viewers watch the same content on repeat, which results in more aggression." Boys at an ITI in Eriyad, Kerala felt that the behaviour of people who spread disharmony or hate on social media on the basis of religion and faith, was not acceptable,**"There are videos making fun of other religions. Some people do this against people of other religions. Such information should not be shared with others."**

Students all across our field sites resonated with the takeaway that the **content on the internet is negatively impacting the younger generations**. Boys in Narmada, Gujarat have seen younger children addicted to their phones, fast losing interest in their studies. Girls in Delhi said the children in school nowadays get their homework sent on WhatsApp groups. This may be discouraging them to write; making them even more dependent on technology. Similarly, ITI students in Kerala were also completely against giving unregulated access to digital devices to children. They had observed children not stepping outside to play, and living in constant isolation.

SUB PART 2

Folk theories about social media's algorithm

Algorithms are increasingly impacting how young people understand the world around them. They are defining what they know, how they see their surroundings, their cultures and their countries. But, young people attempt to understand and subvert the architecture in myriad ways. Many young people have their own explanations of how social media works, through intuitive and experience-based knowledge. Yet, little research has been done on their awareness and understanding of algorithms, especially in India. The theories they form about social media algorithms also affect how they use these platforms.

Almost all of the young people who were part of this research, recognised that their activity on social media was being monitored even when they did not know the term 'algorithm', "The content we consume the most is what appears on our homescreen," shared a school girl in Narmada, Gujarat. Though the knowledge of the extent of monitoring was varied across groups, they were all aware that their likes, comments, interests were being used to show them relevant content. For example, in Haryana, students thought that social media apps were reading their minds, "Our phone is a spy. It reads our minds through our location, camera and audio," whereas students in Selamba, Gujarat mention that apps collected their likes. When asked in Jharsuguda, Odisha girls mentioned that they had never thought about it, and the next day they came prepared with answers after asking their 'bhaiya', older brothers.

"The algorithm tracks our activity"

In comparison, boys from Delhi were the most well-versed in their understanding of social media functions.

One of the boys in Ganjam, Odisha knew the word 'algorithm' but defined it as,

"If we watch something on YouTube, it tends to appear on the feed again".

“Computer sab jaanta hai!” (Computer knows it all)

School students, especially in rural areas, believed that it was the ‘computer’ which was responsible for the content they saw on YouTube and Instagram.

Consider this excerpt from an FGD with grade 9 boys in Patthara, Odisha:

S1: Ma’am computer toh ye bhi janti hai ki hume kya pasand hai. *(Ma’am, the computer even knows our interests)*

S2: Kyuki wo video trending mei chala jata hai isliye mere pas ajata hai. *(Since the video is on trending list, it appears on my feed)*

S1: Computer ye bhi jaanta hai ki kaun kitne time watch karta hai, kis channel ke taraf wo attracted hai. Wo computer dekhta hai. Ussko pata hota hai hum kya dekhte hain aur kis time par dekhte hain. *(The computer even knows who watches for how long, which channel one prefers. It knows what we watch, and at which time)*

S2: Isliye hi wo humara ID leta hai. Usi ID mei isko note karta, fir wohi computer humare pas bhejta hai. *(Therefore, it asks for our ID. It records our preference in the ID, and later the computer sends it to us.)*

S1: Mujhe lagta hai YouTube ke logo ko nahi computer ko pata hai humara kya interest hai. YouTube ko nahi pata humare khud ke phone ko pata hai. *(The computer knows our interests, not the employees of YouTube. YouTube does not know, our phones know about it.)*

S2: Usey pata hai ki hum ye video dekh kar kuch acha kar sakte hain. Isiliye wo dikhata hai. *(They know that we can do something after watching the video, hence, they show it to us.)*

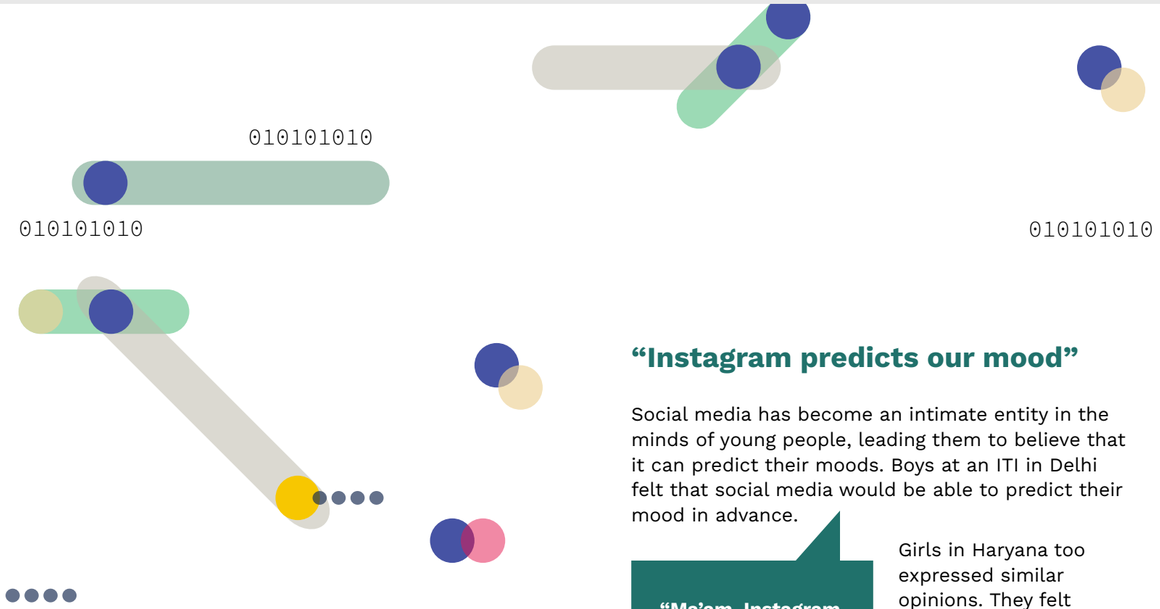
S1: Automatic mode me hoga wo computer. *(The computer might be on automatic mode)*

Young boys in Patthara, Odisha, used the word “computer” instead of “algorithm” as that was more common in their parlance. They felt it was the computer that knew them and had all their information instead of those at YouTube. They believed that the role of a software engineer was to maintain this automatic computer. *“If YouTube is running in automatic mode, then what do software engineers do? Nothing. The computers are in automatic mode - computers undergo maintenance work, right? Probably, they update it on a monthly basis. Youtube changes every month right?”* They felt that the software engineer did not have a big role to play but over the course of the conversation, they asked the question,*“Who actually runs YouTube? Humans or computers?”*

“There are people behind YouTube, oh wait, it’s a robot or a satellite!”

Boys at the ITI in Rajlugarhi, Haryana felt that ‘Internet wale log’ design and control the online content. The internet was supposedly controlled by some people but they were not sure who they were. One of the guesses was the government, “The government only gives us the internet. It comes from them only.” Whereas girls in Rajlugarhi, Haryana believed that there was an individual behind YouTube who is responsible for rolling out content to their phones. The same was expressed by school girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha who also believed that YouTube employees were assigned particular districts, and were responsible for sending content to their devices, “Someone sits behind the YouTube screen. An individual employee is assigned a district. That person can also look after 1 lakh people and send videos to them.” This employee was also blamed for stealing their information to ensure relevant content was shared with people, “The employees of YouTube steal our information, and store it. On the basis of that, we receive videos.” In the beginning of the conversation, they thought there was an employee assigned for every person watching YouTube. Upon realising the number of users on the platform, they settled on there being just one person who manages content for the entire district.

School boys in Narmada, Gujarat believed that Google was aware of everything that they were watching on YouTube. They also believed there were robots or satellites behind YouTube, and speculated that Google owned a big satellite. A boy thought that the content they receive is decided by a person, “There are people sitting at the company and send it (content) through the satellite.” Another boy said “No, it happens on its own.” When asked who decides the content, he said, “Those who work for the Google app.”



“It’s the algorithm”

Only students in Delhi were aware of the word ‘algorithm’ and used it to describe the functioning of social media. Even so, they too fell for prevailing theories about social media listening to their conversations. They felt that the platforms ‘listened’ to their conversations and read their thoughts - even anticipating their questions before they were done typing, “It listens to whatever we discuss, and similar reels pop on our feed.” Boys from ITIs in Kerala felt the same too. Girls from Jahangirpuri, Odisha opined that the algorithm worked in alignment with their search history on other apps; that it picks up conversations through the microphone, and is synced to their contacts, photos etc. They also made the correlation between social media recommendations and AI use. They said, “It knows everything,” indicating that AI would know what they are interested in, what kind of content they posted, the content they drew them in, “We also share what interests us. It analyzes our behavior based on what we share.”

Boys in Haryana also demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of algorithms which they termed as “AI”. They believed AI was responsible for reading their minds to show them the content they liked, “There is a software similar to AI, for instance, whichever video we watch, it reads our minds and finds related videos which interests us.”

“Instagram predicts our mood”

Social media has become an intimate entity in the minds of young people, leading them to believe that it can predict their moods. Boys at an ITI in Delhi felt that social media would be able to predict their mood in advance.

“Ma’am, Instagram shows reels according to our mood. I don’t know why. If we are sad, it shows sad reels”

Girls in Haryana too expressed similar opinions. They felt that Instagram and YouTube could pick up on their emotions before they did, and would show them content that mirrored their emotional states.

Girls in Jharsuguda believed that Google knows the meaning of their lives.

Girls at the ITI in Mangolpuri, Delhi said everything was connected to one another, and the Google Assistant will pick up all the conversations. They even believed that it could read their thoughts and feelings, “It is connected to one another. Google remains ON all the time.” They felt that their conversations were being watched and listened to. Some students felt that their thoughts were not private but were being picked up by social media platforms, “We see reels based on the content that aligns with whatever we speak or think.” They had also noticed that their conversations on WhatsApp were being replicated in the ads shown on other social media platforms, “If I share with my friend that I need this, then Instagram starts showing it to me.”

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“Our emotions fluctuate every 2 seconds”: the Perils of Algorithmic Sho(r)ts

Young people who use social media often realize that it’s an emotional roller coaster. They recognize that the platforms have been designed to keep people hooked on to them, with small doses of dopamine hitting every second. They also realize that this can induce behaviours of compulsive scrolling and phone addiction. Boys in Delhi said that the short form content on social media manipulates their emotions every second, in order to keep them glued to their phones. “We will be watching, then a reel pops up of a disabled person, we feel a little sad inside. Then a patriotic reel pops up, then another of a pretty girl. Every 2 seconds our emotions keep fluctuating”. They often feel guilty for giving into this temptation, and wasting their time on social media. And hence try different coping mechanisms to manage it, while still giving in to the allure many times.

Boys from ITIs in Delhi realised that short form content, though better aligned with their hectic lives, would leave them with no time to engage or think critically about the content itself.

> **While watching a ‘Shorts’ video, we just believe what is shown to us. But when we see the long video, we self-analyze the content, if it is right or wrong. We experience what reflection and analysis means”**

They realise the importance of critically engaging with and reflecting on the content shown to them, by comparing it with their lived experiences - a skill that’s fast-eroding with growing exposure to shortform content. They realise that this is done to ensure that social media users get the most entertainment in the shortest amount of time, influencing them rather easily. Boys believed that people were more prone to getting addicted to shortform content because of the constant dopamine hit. They felt that this was causing irreparable damage to their cognition, and was making them aggressive. Similarly, school boys in Patthara, Odisha recognised that YouTube’s ‘computer’ (alluding to its algorithm) only shows videos of interest to a particular person, which can often lead to ‘nafrat aur dange’ (hatred and riots). But they felt they were above all of this because they were educated, cultured boys. They were able to recognize that short form content was pushed by these platforms to get people to spend more time scrolling, and be more engaged. Assessing and comparing it to their lived experiences, they have seen their peers prioritising scrolling over other activities of importance.

Another boy in Mangolpuri, Delhi when talking about social media, shared that he was going to remove his profile from all these platforms since these were ‘self sabotaging activities’ and spending long hours on the social media made him feel guilty.

> **I used it the entire day. When I realised it later, I felt regretful and blamed myself. Yes, I feel guilty.”**

Boys in Rajlugadhi, Haryana worried that their brain will eventually rot, and their cognitive abilities will diminish because of this. Young people, seeing their peers hooked on to social media, worry about compulsive scrolling, and the long term effects of it on their minds, bodies, hopes and aspirations. They consider it akin to drug addiction, “Our physical health is getting affected.” They were frustrated at the emotional fluctuation and roller coaster ride they had to sign up for every time they used social media. That said, they realise the drawbacks as well. “It is good to be knowledgeable, but ‘overloading’ is bad,” said a boy. They believed social media gives them ‘faltu’ or useless information more than something relevant, and the overload causes confusion. To counter this, they were trying different coping mechanisms like putting their phones on airplane mode or leaving the phone at home, while also acknowledging that they succumb to the impulse most of the time.

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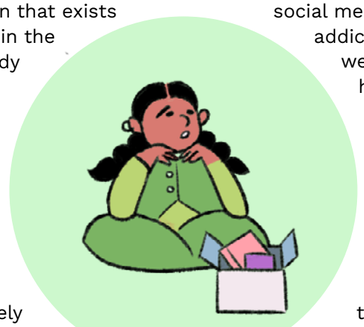
Social Media will Cause Isolation in the Younger Generation

Isolation owing to social media use is a key consideration for young people. They see their peers hooked on to mobile devices for hours, playing games by themselves, rather than collectively. School boys in Patthara, Odisha felt the nature of interpersonal community interaction that exists currently, will reduce in the future. They are already seeing signs of it in their village, where young people are on their mobile phones watching reels in succession. They feel that young people should not be given unrestricted access to mobile phones solely for this reason. ITI girls from Jahangirpuri, Delhi expressed similar sentiments. They felt people would become distant with each other, and only find belonging within the confines of a mobile phone. “The sense of affection/ belongingness will be reduced. We would not have enough time to attend someone’s wedding, or a celebration. Moreover, in the future, they(youth) will be in a worse condition,” said a girl from Jahangirpuri, Delhi. Students in Rajlugarhi, Haryana felt that younger generations would lose out on friendships, as the internet and social media percolate into more aspects of their lives. “The time spent with friends in socialising will decrease.”



These students did not see much value in forming online friendships, “If something happens to me, like if I am unwell, they can visit me. Online friends can’t do that.” Similar sentiments were echoed in Kerala as well, where young people felt that social media’s inherently addictive tendencies were causing harm to human relationships. They believed that earlier when there was no internet, people used to spend more time together. Now people may appear together but only through the internet. ITI students compared their childhood with that of the younger generation, and felt that children these days were born with a smartphone in their hands, while in their childhood they had to use scratchcards to recharge. Girls in Pilicode, Kerala were worried about the mental health effects of social media use on young people, “One of the issues is that people are getting addicted to technology. This leads to problems with sight, and mental health issues like people becoming lonely. There will be less direct interaction between people. Indirect interactions will increase.”

“Ab mobile insan ko chalata hai”: Agency vs Manipulation and the Myth of Being in Control

“They will probably fix the algorithm for the next 6 months so that this is what will be shown to the viewer. They monitor everyday what the viewer likes. They offer it gradually, at first 20%, then 60% and then over time 100%”

Although young people realise that social media platforms leverage their likes and interests to show them ‘relevant’ videos, they largely feel that they are in control of its functioning. They believe that the algorithm adapts to their interests over time, in line with the changes in their own preferences. Boys from Delhi, being the outliers, believed that it was a chicken-and-egg situation. While their choices influenced the algorithm, the algorithm also influenced them in return. During our engagement, young people showed signs of a belief that they had to give up their agency when using social media.

They further realised that the algorithm may occasionally show them completely new categories of content to assess their response. Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha believed that the content shown to them was to understand what kind of advertisements they would like. One of them mentioned that since she was above 18 years of age, YouTube would often show her advertisements related to elections. She opined that since the internet had all the information, it obviously knew that she had a Voter ID.

Boys from Delhi were able to articulate the problems within the echo chambers as well, especially when it came to violent content. They believed that it was easy for a person to go down the rabbithole of violent content which could have a grave impact on their lives. Social media algorithms were prone to showing one kind of content to people, and they wished for this to be stopped. According to them, this is when people forfeit complete control, and operate at the behest of the algorithm, “We do not have enough control over it. Whoever has knowledge, they’ll have 50% control and whoever doesn’t, they’ll only have 20% control over it.”

SUB PART 3

Being data points

Social media platforms constantly collect massive amounts of data from its users, which in turn shapes the algorithm that recommends content and delivers targeted ads. The personal data mined by these platforms ends up influencing people's lives in ways one cannot anticipate. Insights from other research shows that while young people are concerned about the data privacy of the content that they actively share on social media, they are unaware of the data they generate unconsciously. Due to the opacity of the digital infrastructure, individuals often have little insight and understanding of the ways in which these data might be used.[27]

27

Pangrazio, L., & Selwyn, N. (2018). "It's not like it's life or death or whatever": Young people's understandings of social media data. Social Media + Society, 4(3).

Students in our research had a varying understanding of what personal data was, and what this data means on a social media platform. The majority of them demonstrated not knowing or thinking about the data social media websites collected about them. On prompting and creating spaces for reflection, they started speculating what information could platforms like Google or Instagram have of them. In almost every state, barring Delhi, they went through this journey:

First phase: "Google only has the information we give it."

In many cases, students were not able to establish relationships between YouTube and Google, or Instagram and Whatsapp. They felt that all these apps were isolated and did not have anything to do with each other. School girls in Narmada, Gujarat debated whether Youtube was an app or a company. Five girls believed that it was just an app whereas only one believed that it was a company. The rest of the six girls did not want to weigh in. They reasoned that because it sits in the app store, it must just be an app. When asked, "What do you think Google/Instagram knows about you?" students generally responded with a list that included their name, platform ID, email address, in some cases phone number, and in rare cases address/ geo location. School students in Patthara, Odisha initially assumed that Google wouldn't know anything about them, which they had not already explicitly shared. They felt it had no way of knowing anything more about their lives. They also said it would know basic information about them, but not who they were as people. Similarly students in Jharsuguda, Odisha felt that Google wouldn't know their personal information like their back account details, age, their likes and dislikes. School girls in Bavla, Gujarat added their 'Aadhar Card' to the list, and also assumed it might know the location of their house, "...because we have to add it when we purchase something online."

Second phase: "Google knows us better than our friends."

Upon prompting further, students started wondering if Google/Instagram knew more about them than they initially thought. They quickly shifted to thinking that these platforms may know everything about them. School boys in Narmada, Gujarat assumed it would know where they stayed or how many siblings they had. It would also know of their likes, dislikes, and the place they studied at. When asked how, a boy responded, "We add school pics on our Whatsapp status and Instagram." ITI girls in Pilicode, Kerala felt that platforms like Google and Instagram knew their identity thoroughly. Through the photos they uploaded on social media, they believed, "It can recognize our faces." ITI boys in Delhi felt Google would know their weaknesses as well, "It knows my English is not good. It knows this is my weakness." Or it would also know, "How much money I have in my bank account." School girls in Narmada, Gujarat believed that Youtube knew their IDs, the kind of videos they watched generally, the videos they disliked, their personal beliefs, where they commented, and what they shared. While thinking aloud, a girl added that she felt that Instagram knows what they talk about with their friends because "Whatever I say on the personal chat of my Instagram account, those get assimilated into the code of Instagram."

Students started wondering whether Google knew more about them than their own best friends or family. In many discussions, students took opposing sides, where one side was convinced that these apps know much more than their friends, while the other side felt that human connections knew and understood people better. School students in Patthara, Odisha also said that Google knows everything about them, including their location details even without a GPS tracker. "It keeps tracking us all the time. Because even if we don't turn on the location, it will still be able to tell the temperature." After deliberating, they added that these apps cannot possibly know everything and rationalized, "If I keep my phone in one place and go somewhere else, how would Google know anything about what is happening?"

Third phase: "Google collecting our data is a good thing."

Among all the students, ITI boys in Delhi had demonstrated an understanding of personal data and its uses on social media to deliver targeted ads, "Google shares our data with third parties." But they believed this to be a good thing as long as it was used for commercial purposes, and helped sellers and buyers to communicate better. They also recognised that this could lead to a scam if the data were to fall into the wrong hands, but they put their faith in tech companies, and believed that they must have safeguards to ensure that doesn't happen. School girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha believed that tech companies having their data is for the good, "Companies won't do anything, the problem is only the hackers. Companies can do it, but they won't. What would they do with our data? There are too many people in this world. If they plan to do something with each person's data, they would have to halt their operations entirely," they reasoned.

School boys in Patthara believed that Google would know what caste they belonged to, through which it indirectly would also know their families' conditions. They believed that Google knowing their income bracket to be a good thing as they would tell other people to help them. They trusted Google to be a social beneficiary, "People at Google are good." They also said they felt more secure if the people working at the company knew what they were watching, so they could keep an eye on them. Similarly, girls in Narmada, Gujarat felt that there was no reason for tech companies to misuse their data. They believed this data was being collected to benefit the end user, "It's a good thing that YouTube knows what we like and what we don't. That is its job, and that's what it is doing." They also believed that Google tracking them was a good thing, because if they encountered a problem, the people at Google could help them. Comparing YouTube and Instagram to their friends, they felt that these companies will keep their secrets safe with them. One girl wondered, "What if YouTube gives our information to someone for money?" But she quickly countered her own point by adding, "But why would YouTube do that? YouTube achcha hai, wo aisa nahi karega." (YouTube is good, it won't do something like that.)

Everything, Everywhere, All At Once

The sea of information young people engage with, in their everyday lives is reshaping, questioning and reinforcing their ideologies, principles and beliefs. Social media as a space is making way for boys to engage in intentionally posting provocative and offensive content, at the cost of harming another individual. This in turn is pushing women to become passive users on the internet. Boys are getting indoctrinated with toxic masculinity,[28] and girls are being taught to be 'good girls.' These ideologies are translating into their offline lives in how they behave, how they perceive the opposite gender, and how they shape their aspirations for the future. Owing to the plethora of content that young people are exposed to from a young age, they are forming opinions, and are being pushed into echo chambers at a very early age. This is coming in the way of their understanding and making sense of the world patiently and intentionally. They are beginning to form opinions about larger systems and society like gender, religion, political ideologies and moral values, without the knowledge and exposure to weigh multiple perspectives. Content online is not regulated for age-appropriateness, and young people end up consuming the same content as their more discerning older counterparts.

As digital natives, students have figured out how to critically consume information online, to a considerable extent. Young people know they should not be trusting every bit of information online and also realize most of the content they come across on social media is to be taken with a pinch of salt as there is a great possibility of it being fake news. But this is not uniformly applied across all the scenarios. Studies indicate that the blurred boundaries between professional and non-professional sources of news, has provoked cynicism and apathy among the youth, making them abandon all efforts to verify information. Some young people also demonstrated strategies and tactics for critically evaluating news, but only likely to be activated under certain circumstances.[29] Even as part of our research, young people displayed 'selective fact checking' tendencies. When a piece of information challenges something that they believe in, this line of real and fake starts to blur. The moment they come across negative news about someone they like, it is again dismissed as fake news. If they completely believe a piece of information to be true, then they have no reason to verify it. The politics of fact checking that puts the onus on the end-user, leaves young people in a dangerous position. Without adequate skills of discernment and critical thinking, they are expected to navigate fake news efficiently. This is pushing them into echo chambers, in some cases towards extreme content, and making them question their textbooks. Unregulated and unverified content is reinforcing their beliefs and further foreclosing the desire to engage with multiple viewpoints, before forming an opinion.

Since social media platforms optimize the algorithms which prioritize engagement over everything else, young people get pushed into silos narrowing their perspectives. Such reinforcement of regressive ideas is visibly disempowering the younger generation. Exclusion of information is a feature of social media. Further, research has shown that information available online in generally partisan, and is often consumed by people who already agree with the viewpoints, pushing them further into the echo chambers.[30] Exclusion happens at the level of the user as well. We tend to not have tolerance for differing opinions, and tend to seek out likeminded communities on the internet.[31] This is essentially what an echochamber is, where constant reiteration of a similar message reinforces the users' belief while pushing out space for rebuttal and counterviews.[32]

28

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29

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Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide. New York University Press.

31

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Jamieson, K., H., & Joseph, N. C. (2008). Echo chamber: Rush limbaugh and the conservative media establishment. Oxford University Press.

Folk Theories, Anthropomorphising and a Benevolent watcher

Social media systems are powerful, opaque, and unevenly explained to most young people. Without proper guidance on how social media functions, young people are making their own folk theories derived from their lived experiences and intuition. Through the spaces created as part of this research, they brought their doubts and questions about algorithms to the fore. These folk theories are evidence of sense-making under conditions of informational opacity. When platforms do not reveal how personalisation happens and their educational institutions do not guide them to understand, young people fill the gaps in their knowledge through their own intuition, observation, peers, older siblings, and the metaphors of daily life (such as "computer," "satellite", "robot" or "employee behind the screen"). Young people recognise that their data is being tracked and the platforms adapt to their behaviour and interests to anticipate their preferences. However, in the absence of language or informed understanding to describe automated personalisation, this awareness is described through **anthropomorphising the machine.**

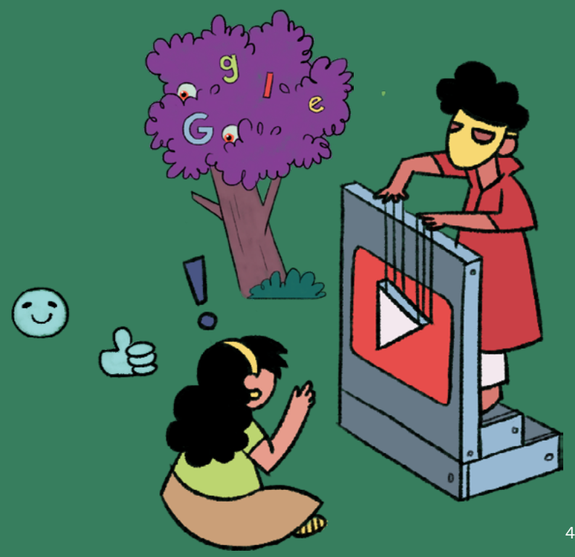
There's a striking geographic divide in algorithmic literacy across India, with urban-rural and gender dimensions shaping how young people conceptualize social media functioning. Boys from a Delhi ITI demonstrated the most sophisticated understanding, using technical terminology like 'algorithm' and recognizing the bi-directional influence between users and platforms. In contrast, younger rural students in Patthara, Odisha, attributed agency to the 'computer' rather than a human-designed system, while girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha either relied on their older brothers for explanations they had 'never thought about' or believed employees of YouTube sent videos to their phones. The fact that boys across locations consistently demonstrated more technical vocabulary than girls points to gendered patterns in how digital literacy is cultivated and shared within communities. A lack of awareness around why platforms are designed the way they are, limits young people's ability to recognise manipulation, emotional steering, and influence.

Furthermore, the students' understanding of data collection revealed their misplaced trust in corporate technology. Initially, most students believed platforms only knew what they explicitly shared, where some were unable to even recognize that different apps belonged to the same company. When prompted to think deeper, they quickly swung to the opposite extreme, convinced that these platforms knew everything about them, from their weaknesses to their bank accounts. But this didn't leave them feeling concerned. Instead, students rationalized this surveillance as beneficial. They trusted that companies were inherently good, that the scale of users was too large for individual exploitation, and that being watched actually made them safer. The opacity of how data actually gets collected, stored, and used, led to an implicit faith that young people placed on these companies, believing that they will see them as humans, and therefore, treat their information with care.

Despite this being the prevalent scenario, the young people we spoke to did demonstrate a fair understanding of algorithms and surveillance capitalism (without formal education). Even though their beliefs about microphone access and thought-reading were technically imprecise, it demonstrated that young people sensed the accuracy of targeted content delivery, and some even understood the profit-motives of such platforms. Without formally being introduced to algorithmic literacy, young people demonstrated a level of embodied intuition about social media architecture, even when they were not introduced to the concept formally.

That said, it's important to note that young people's recognition of algorithmic manipulation, sits in contrast with their belief in personal control over their digital experiences. Most participants felt they remained 'in control' because algorithms adapted to their stated preferences, failing to recognize how the platforms shaped those preferences in the first place. Only the boys in an ITI in Delhi acknowledged mutual influence, and articulated it as a **'chicken-and-egg situation'.**

Young people also demonstrated a remarkable level of reflexivity about social media's harmful effects, particularly regarding short form content and compulsive scrolling. A few students articulated sophisticated critiques of how platforms exploit dopamine-driven engagement, with boys from Delhi explicitly connecting short videos to reduced critical thinking. Many young people demonstrated awareness that they are not merely consuming media but are actually producing affect - aspiration, rage, pride etc. They were aware that these platforms are making them perform affective labour. This was more prominent among boys than girls, and in urban areas rather than in rural areas. This could be due to the exploration that young boys are allowed to do on the internet, which girls are policed for. While young people articulated their anxieties about future generations' use of the internet, the irony was evident in their articulation. Even though they voiced their concerns, especially for the younger generation, they were ultimately themselves unable to resist social media's pull.



Need of the hour

Algorithmic literacy

Young people urgently need to be introduced to algorithmic literacy. “Algorithmic literacy” refers to the combination of users’ awareness, knowledge, imaginaries, and tactics around algorithms.[33] While there are ample efforts being made to make the young digitally literate, these efforts seldom find mentions of algorithmic literacy. Algorithms by their very nature limit user agency, and take automated decisions on what information to display and filter out. Developing an understanding of algorithmic personalisation will help young people in discerning what kind of information to seek out. But it’s important to note that there are geographic and gendered disparities in algorithmic understanding of young people. Therefore, formal algorithmic literacy initiatives must account for existing knowledge gaps, while respecting the experiential knowledge that young people have already developed.

Media Pluralism and Algorithmic Plurality

Even when young people are algorithmically literate, navigating the architecture of social media is difficult for them. This shows that algorithmic literacy alone cannot solve the complex problem of echochambers and individual awareness cannot counteract systemic design. Since social media is a public space, the design of these systems need to centre media pluralism and promote algorithmic plurality. The design of the algorithms need to prioritize exposure to diverse perspectives and view points, to enhance engagement and foster critical thinking. Users and young people should be given the agency to modulate exposure to certain kinds of content, express interest and demand visibility to alternate viewpoints.

33

Swart, J. (2021). Experiencing algorithms: How young people understand, feel about, and engage with algorithmic news selection on social media. Social Media + Society, 7(2).

Well-being centered design:

Young people’s articulated concerns about addiction, isolation, and cognitive harm, suggest that they would welcome systemic interventions that centre well-being and critical engagement, rather than a dopamine hit:

- Long form content that aids reflection and critical thinking
- Design changes that prioritize well-being over engagement

The role of the education system:
Education systems and classrooms need to design spaces for dialogue where young people can come and unpack the content they are consuming online. Peer and facilitator-led meaning-making sessions and spaces will help young people consider varying viewpoints and challenge their own opinions.

These considerations are particularly important as young people get increasingly exposed and acquainted with Generative AI (GenAI). GenAI is pushing them further into intimate relationships with ‘personalized algorithms’ based on trust, and simulating human behaviour.

The concerns that young people have mentioned about social media will only be exacerbated through such AI systems.

ZONE 2

YouTube University

“Instagram toh ‘mindfree’ ke liye hota hai, YouTube seekhne ke liye hai.”

“What is the correct way to use a phone?”

is what Krishna eagerly asks when a researcher comes to his village to understand how young people are using their digital devices. His twin brother, Hari and him, both 15 years of age, have big dreams. One wants to be an IAS officer, and the other, a software engineer. They are not deterred by the fact that their government school, located next to the Chilika lake in Odisha, doesn’t have the relevant infrastructure, nor the kind of teachers to help them realize their dreams. They are diligent, disciplined, god-fearing and well-mannered.

Starting their day at 4:50 AM every morning, they spend an hour praying at their home shrine. At night, the Gods are called upon for just five minutes, before going to bed. Religion is an important facet in their lives. Something that makes their parents quite proud. Their busy lives are run in accordance to a strict timetable, with a little time for fun slotted in. After nine whole hours of study, at school, and at the tuition class, they happily spend an hour playing cricket, and another watching videos on YouTube.

Both of them could access a smart phone because of the COVID-19 pandemic; a device they share with their mother. The pandemic pushed classrooms online, and access to a smart phone changed the boys’ lives. The world was at their fingertips. Their father, a strict, government school teacher, has permitted some indulgence in social media, provided the boys leveraged it for their studies. Afterall, it is his dream to see one of his sons as a software engineer, and the other as a district magistrate. The parents have tethered all their hopes and dreams to the future of their sons. “Digital India,” the father declares, explaining why software engineering was the future of the country. His sons hold the key, and cannot afford to mess up.

The father reminisces of a time in 1998 when he saw a mobile phone for the first time, and could not comprehend that it was possible to speak to another person through a wireless device. Cut to today, when his wife holds a mobile phone in her hand, and watches videos on Ayurveda everyday. The wife is soft-spoken and dutiful, who never dares to counter her husband. She diligently follows Raghu Dixit and his teachings on YouTube, and imparts his doctrine to the family.

The father himself samples a bit of YouTube every now and then. He clarifies, “Only YouTube news.” He has recently ‘learned’ that people who consume non-vegetarian food are like tigers - they are always angry and therefore, perish easily in a battle. Vegetarians, on the other hand, are calm and composed, therefore better during a war - signalling that their sons were being brought up with calm and composed minds.

first acquainted with YouTube, they felt that they stumbled on a gold mine. They found videos on every topic their mind could conjure. Hari encountered an advertisement about a video editing app, while watching a history video one night. It sparked his curiosity, and led him to download it. He immediately saw value; it could be a game changer for his Instagram account. He learned how to edit videos, photos, and even music. A new world opened up to him, and he was being drawn into its vortex. He let his creativity flourish with every picture and video he edited. All of his masterpieces found a space on his Instagram grid, many of them self-portraits.

Krishna’s YouTube world was different from his brother’s. His feed showed him dance videos. It seemed to know more about his interests than his own father did. He started watching dance lessons on YouTube to learn Bollywood and contemporary dance styles. His YouTube feed is now teeming with dance content; he lives and breathes it online. All the new moves he finds on the platform get replicated the very same day. Once he masters the moves, he posts them on his Instagram account. The platform has also become a space for him to express his aspirations freely. YouTube is his teacher, Instagram, his stage. He puts his dance videos on his profile almost regularly, believing that it can make him famous. Maybe then, he will start earning, and his father may allow him to fulfil his dream. His passion and zeal for dance guides him on these apps. While tinkering with them, he chanced upon another dancer’s account. Sameer Das had more than 10,000 followers, and was a regular on Instagram. Krishna couldn’t believe his eyes at first, when he saw that one of his posts was geo-tagged to Patthara, Odisha, the village where his school was located. Without a second thought, he messaged Sameer hoping to get a chance to meet him in person. To his surprise, the man agreed, and was even willing to teach Krishna through regular, in-person classes. To Krishna, he is an idol, a Guru. He is mesmerised by Sameer’s struggles, craft, and his journey:

“He wasn’t good at studies, so he pursued dance.”
“He learned on his own without a Guru.”
“He had to drop out of school because of financial crises at home.”
“He has so many followers; he’s pretty famous, and he’s not even 25 yet!”

Krishna and Hari’s father, oblivious to their inner

worlds, reprimands them for their frivolous use of social media. He wants them to only use it for educational purposes. Krishna pegs his father's sternness to his profession, "He's a teacher, that's why he scolds us a lot." His mother, who used to dance as a child, supports him in his endeavour, though she considers his dancing a mere hobby.

Though Krishna is a dancer online, he believes he can never really pursue dancing as a full-time profession. He is indebted to his father, and therefore, will have to follow the path his father has laid down. "My first and foremost duty is to make them happy," he says. Since he is in grade 9 now, he has stopped attending the dance classes to devote his undivided attention to his books.

Their father revokes their access to digital devices whenever he feels that the boys must spend more time studying. His wife too is asked to comply. But Krishna and Hari do not uncritically accept all the rules laid down by their father. They have their own ways to defy them. Once, when their father had changed the pattern lock of his phone to ensure the boys did not waste their time, Krishna and Hari conceived a mischievous plan. They cleaned the screen of their father's phone and sprinkled some powder on it. Pretending to acquire important school information, they asked the father to unlock the phone for 5 minutes. Once their father put the pattern on the screen, it was etched in the powdery terrain, revealing the password. They then snuck the phone out, and used it whenever their father was sleeping.

Their village, Bhejiput, Odisha is dependent on agriculture, where people belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) and upper castes mostly reside. Patthara, the neighbouring village where their school is located, is home to the Chilika fishing community, populated by people from the Scheduled Castes (SC) community. A highway divides both the villages. Krishna and Hari are quick to dismiss their connection to Chilika, and the people of Patthara.

"They are SC no, and we are OBC"
"Uneducated people live there, Bhejiput, on the other hand, houses Brahmins and other upper castes."
"Communities in Patthara engage in gambling because they are unemployed, uncivilized, and undisciplined."

Krishna and Hari mention that even their schoolmates engage in gambling. Their voices express considerable disdain when they speak about Patthara. Their parents have instilled certain boundaries in them. Their father warns them to not mix with "bad company," a phrase in the village that often serves as a euphemism for lower-caste neighbours. Krishna and Hari look down upon their schoolmates from Patthara, believing that they are taking up government resources and benefits which could be utilised elsewhere. "He only uses it for 'FreeFire,' the whole day he sits under the tree and plays games. He doesn't study at all and his parents don't care," narrates Hari about a boy from the fishing community who aspires to be a gamer. To Hari, this boy's use of the phone is immoral. According to the brothers, only they seem to use the phone correctly in their school, where the majority of the students are from the fishing community.

In addition to their father's teaching, they have also 'learned' about the perils of caste reservation online. Since Hari seeks to pursue a government job in the future, reserved seats for the marginalized seem like a betrayal to him. More so, when he sees his batchmates not working as hard as he thinks he is. He has found a few WhatsApp groups online that post general knowledge questions every day. This, he believes, helps him keep his mind sharp to prepare for the eventual competitive exams he has to take. The boys learn many different things on YouTube, much of it is about the history and the politics of India. Sometimes, they encounter information that challenges their books. Initially, it confused them, but now they are convinced that their books hide important information from them. They ask, "Gandhiji could have saved Bhagat Singh but he didn't. Why is that?" Without waiting for a response they declare, it's because he was colluding with the British.

In the same breath, they declare that they are too educated and cultured to fall for fake news they encounter online. If they feel some information on a YouTube channel is wrong, they quickly ask Google to verify it. But what they believe to be true needs no verification. Without proper guardrails, they make sense of all the information they get bombarded with, on their own. Both the brothers also mention that there is a "Computer behind YouTube." Whatever they search for, goes to this computer which then marks their interests. They believe it works for their betterment, and hence "sends certain videos to their phones" from which they can learn.

In front of their school peers, Krishna and Hari are confident and entitled. But come across as unsure and tentative in their father's presence. Their voices are not as booming, their body language shrinks. When asked what they want to be when they grow up, Krishna meekly mumbles in front of his father that he wants to become a software engineer. Hoping that no one mentions his aspirations to be a dancer; something he cannot dare to admit in front of his father. Their mother interjects that they should be good human beings above all.

Krishna and Hari's story reveals how young people in rural India are reimagining what it means to learn. For many young people, social media is not a distraction from education, but has become a crucial extension of it. What they do not receive from their educational institutions, they often seek and find online. It has become a place where they can explore, experiment, and express themselves. Their learning is self-directed, often accidental, and deeply entangled with aspiration, leisure, and moral judgment. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram have become sites for young people where the boundaries between education and entertainment blur. Social media's public pedagogy, therefore, unfolds as a complex and contested space of learning.

As young people increasingly rely on social media and other platforms to acquire information and knowledge, how should the education system evolve to ensure young people are not left on their own to make sense of the plethora of information they encounter on the very many digital maidans?

ZONE 2

YouTube University

Humans have an innate capacity to learn. Learning does not just happen in institutional spaces, but is spread out across the lifetime of a human being. It happens through interactions with other people, and with different environments and worlds. It is in our nature to learn, education or no education, curriculum or no curriculum, pedagogy or no pedagogy.[34]

Young people are increasingly using social media, and more specifically, YouTube as a replacement for the education system. They are acquiring knowledge and skills through these apps, that they feel are preparing them for the real world - more than traditional education systems. Despite this, social media as a space for informal learning is an emerging field of study. How young Indians in disadvantaged settings are using social media to learn, and the connections between formal and informal learning, is a relatively underexplored field.[35] Informal learning is defined as, “learning that is outside of what is mandated by educational institutions and is learner-controlled, exploratory, and spontaneous.”[36] But Greenhow and Lewin theorise learning on social media as having both attributes of formality and informality.

Just like everyday learning, digital learning also takes shape in ways that are often meandering, incidental, unexpected or even accidental. It evolves without intention in most cases, through exploration either by a chance encounter, or as an indirect consequence of interaction with the digital world. It’s embedded everywhere in the world, and therefore is mostly invisible.

While social media engagement of young people is mostly for leisure, their interaction with its many aspects lead to unintended learning. In some cases, to negotiate access with parents, learning is the first reason through which leisure is practised. Despite the entry point being leisure, young people end up learning and gaining skills by being on the internet.

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Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2004). Designs for learning. E–Learning, 1(1), 38.

35

Greenhow, C., & Lewin, C. (2016). Social media and education: Re-conceptualizing the boundaries of formal and informal learning. Learning, Media and Technology, 41(1), 6–30.

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Learning Practices

01. Learning through exploration:

Through their interaction with the content, advertisements and online communities, they learn skills as an unintended consequence or stumble upon topics and concepts that spark curiosity, drawing them into deeper learning opportunities which they hadn't originally sought out. **This learning is a consequence of curiosity.** Learning through exploration happens in two distinct ways:

Indirect consequence:
Young people engage in different practices online. They consume content, produce content, and engage with different people either directly or indirectly. These practices lead to learning which may not be seen as such.

Serendipity:
While engaging with content and different accounts, young people may stumble upon topics, tools or skills which may draw them in for further exploration. This happens directly through content that appears on their feeds, or through advertisements that appear as breaks in their content consumption.

02. Intentional learning:

This is where young people engage with social media with the primary purpose of accessing new information or skills. Many young people use platforms like YouTube to supplement their traditional curricula. This learning, though intentional, is largely self-directed. Young people feel that their traditional curricula is not preparing them for the real world, and since their need is not being met, they turn to YouTube to address it. This learning approach is enabling a growing distrust towards the education system, as young people feel that the system is giving them either outdated or incomplete information about skills and knowledge. They are instead increasingly placing their trust in online spaces to glean relevant information.

Gender and Geographical Contexts

The resultant exploration and learning is heavily gendered, as girls' agency is restricted, and hence they do not learn in the same way as boys. Girls explore, but only within the bounds of acceptable gender norms - fashion, makeup, cooking etc.

A more conscious and evolved kind of social media exploration is evident in urban areas, specifically, in Delhi where students are enterprising, and are actively learning from the internet, while students in Haryana would wait for instructions from the educators. In rural areas, such exploration was limited.

01
Learning through Exploration: an Indirect Consequence?

As young people scroll, post, argue, or mimic, they are inadvertently building skills, learning social codes, and reconstituting knowledge outside formal institutions. These learnings are indirect consequences, and emerge through exploration, curiosity, and chance encounters. Below, we trace four key domains of such informal learning: communication, gender, digital literacy, and cultural exchange.

I. Communication Skills

Across sites, the internet is described as the teacher of language and communication. YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Discord are used as conversational classrooms where young people learn to respond, argue, flirt, and communicate with strangers. These platforms may be used intentionally for the purpose of communication, or communication may be the indirect outcome of young people's engagement.

Boys in many states and across educational institutions were using Discord while playing games, and this was leading them to communicate with people in different regions and countries. They learned to speak in English and Hindi because of this engagement. Some boys also took the assistance of Google to respond better to people when engaging in an online feud. This has been inadvertently improving and sharpening their communication skills. Many boys use Snapchat to speak to girls from different countries using English as the language of communication. Boys appreciated social media platforms, because to them, it enabled and taught them to speak to girls. They learn new idioms, search for unfamiliar words, and rehearse responses before posting. This can be seen as a form of peer-mediated learning and acquiring of skills.

> **"I learnt speaking/communication skills from Discord or Twitter only. When you fight on these apps, you gain knowledge. If someone says something, you go and look it up online, in order to respond to him."**
> Boy from an ITI in Jahangirpuri, Delhi

While boys were actively seeking conversations, girls were inhibited, and did not prefer to speak to strangers. They, instead, preferred to watch videos on communication or use apps like DuoLingo to learn English. Snapchat is the preferred app where girls communicate with strangers because the messages disappear.

> **We ask Google or YouTube by typing in English. Sometimes, we type Hindi words in English or write in English itself. We cannot speak in English to you, but we can type in English,"**

said a school girl from Bavla, Gujarat.

II. Reinforcing Gender Norms

Content on young people's social media feeds, on Instagram and YouTube, are teeming with prescribed gender roles. While mirroring the gendered social worlds that young people inhabit, these online spaces also remake them. Girls' digital worlds often teach them the difference between a 'bad girl' and a 'good girl' and reinforce the sexual division of labour and gender roles. Girls find themselves agreeing to the gender-specific content they encounter, and aspire to become like the women they see on these platforms. Two specific kinds of content or tropes about the 'good girl' that show up on their feed are the traditional housewives or the modern super woman. Traditional housewives content shows them how to be good wives, mothers and daughter-in-laws. These content creators promote serving their husbands and in-laws, and show various ways in which women can take better care of their families. School-going girls encounter and engage with this content more than ITI students. For the older girls, the modern superwoman content was more prevalent. Here, the influencers focused on being the all-achieving modern woman; someone who could take care of the family as well be ambitious and perform well at work. Many ITI-going girls look up to these women and want a future like theirs.

> **We watch reels about mothers, where it informs about how to be a good mother"**

A girl in 9th grade in Narmada, Gujarat

> **I seek inspiration from independent girls. Keerthi Mehra - she works, supports her family, and posts videos as well."**

A girl from Mongolpuri ITI, Delhi

> **Dimple Malhan from YouTube, does household work, and creates cooking videos as well. I want to do it all, create cooking videos and manage everything as well"**

A girl from Mongolpuri ITI, Delhi

Many girls also get exposed to the counterview. They become acutely aware of what constitutes a 'bad girl'. 'Gandi photos' is what girls in Narmada, Gujarat labelled 'bad girl' content. They have a list of ways to protect themselves from ever being perceived as a 'bad girl' - Not to post their own pictures or videos, not to accept unknown follower requests, not to talk to unknown men, and not to make reels, among others.

While girls learn how to be 'good' or 'ideal' women, boys may be exposed to harmful notions about women and girls. Some of the interactions boys have in digital spaces reinforce their already existing perceptions about girls and women. They are also building new perceptions about girls based on the content they consume or the influencers they follow. Boys at an ITI in Jahangirpuri, Delhi mentioned that they came across content on Instagram that alluded that "women's brains were in their knees" and that "boys lose their intellectual prowess after interacting with girls."

III. Digital Literacy

Young people are learning how to find, evaluate, and communicate information using digital media

platforms. They are assimilating the technical know-hows as well as the cognitive abilities to create, evaluate and share information. For example, girls in Narmada, Gujarat did not have regular access to digital devices because they resided in a hostel. They were also shy about showcasing their knowledge about social media, thinking that they may be categorised as 'bad girls'. But when given access to a phone with Instagram and YouTube, these girls demonstrated exemplary knowledge about making and editing reels.

Even a rudimentary understanding of algorithm functioning indicates that young people are increasingly becoming digitally literate. However, the levels of digital literacy may differ across geographic and gender parameters. As established earlier, boys in urban areas are more digitally literate than girls in rural areas. Nonetheless, without proper education about digital literacy, the skills that young people have gained are from their lived experiences and tinkering, rather than didactic education.

IV. Cultural Exchange and the Imagination of elsewhere

Young people learn about different cultures and places through social media. They watch reels, videos and connect with people outside their communities. Some also exchange information on their specific socio-political aspects with strangers. For example, boys in Delhi discussed the United States' elections with friends and strangers on Telegram and Discord.

The current cultural hype around South Korea[37] has also exposed many young people, especially girls to Korean culture. Through K-pop, K-drama and other Korean content that they watch on YouTube and Instagram, they have built a perception of Korea in their minds. Some even dream of travelling to South Korea, and this exposure is shaping their aspirations of becoming like the Korean stars they see across platforms. While watching K-dramas, girls are also familiarising themselves with different job roles like that of the CEO, Chairman and other senior leaders. They mentioned that they didn't know how a company was run before or who or what a CEO was.

> **Teacher, I want to be a K-pop idol. When I grow up, I want to work in Korea. I like Korea a lot, it is a small country yet its influence is spreading among other countries."**

A girl from Bavla, Gujarat

Girls have also been learning about Korean beauty standards, and said that Korean makeup and skin care is better than Indian products, which is why they have flawless skin. This is also getting replicated in their non-digital lives where siblings help each other with Korean beauty solutions.

> **Our makeup consists of excessive chemicals. Theirs lack chemicals which keeps the skin healthy."**

A girl from an ITI in Delhi

Social media has opened a world to our young people, which they didn't know existed. It has also nudged them to build their aspirations towards travelling to these far-off places. Many boys are inspired to travel to other states (and even counties), based on their social media exposure. Some of them had Kedarnath listed as a travel destination they aspired to visit, with some already having made the journey. While boys had the freedom to travel if finances permitted, girls on the other hand didn't think they would be able to travel outside their state because of familial restrictions. For example, a girl in Mangolpuri, Delhi, who followed a lot of travel and food vlogs, said she aspires to be able to travel in the future, and if possible create a vlog, "I do not travel as of now. But I have written about my future travel plans." Many young people also learnt what it's like to work in different cities. For example, a boy at an ITI in Delhi said,

> **When I see the reels, I feel like going out and working in places like Chennai and Bangalore. I have plans to go there after I am done with my courses."**

37

Soman, A., & Jaggi, R.K. (2022). Korean dramas and Indian youngsters: Viewership, aspirations and consumerism. In: Roy, R.K., Das, B. (Eds.). Korean wave in South Asia, transcultural flow, fandom and identity, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 169-184.

02
Learning through exploration - serendipity

Another important aspect of learning through exploration is through serendipity. Young people, while scrolling, stumble upon content that incites their curiosity to explore it further. This was particularly true for life skills and creative fields.

2.1 Financial Literacy

Boys in Delhi were learning about financial literacy having chanced upon financial influencers on Instagram and YouTube. Many boys were inspired to learn trading as well. This would lead them to find more sources, and many as a result were investing in stocks and SIPs. While boys have been actively looking for resources and accounts that could help them learn online trading, girls expressed their interest but did not actually proactively learn. They didn't want to overstep their boundaries, and get into perceived men's fields. Girls from Mangolpuri, Delhi said that they were interested to learn online trading and investment,

> **I get inspired by people who are involved in trading. I wanted to learn that."**

Whereas boys from Delhi ITI mentioned that they reached out to people personally on Instagram to receive personalised feedback as well.

2.2 Creative fields

Students came across the names of certain apps for video or photo editing while exploring profiles on Instagram. To this end, they looked up for lessons on YouTube. In a similar vein, students have been familiarizing themselves with techniques and fields that they didn't know existed. Advertisements or content on Instagram, YouTube have been important catalysts for this. A boy from Bavla, Gujarat learned about animation through some YouTube content, and is now considering it as a career option to pursue.

> **I was watching a video on YouTube, and a video editing ad appeared in between. I downloaded that app and learnt it through YouTube. I have now learnt to edit my dance videos."**

said a Patthara, Odisha school boy. Students at the Rajlugadhi, Haryana ITI also had a similar experience to share,

> **It is not necessary that we find out about such information through apps or friends. Like when we are watching YouTube videos, an AD pops up, we learn that such apps can also be used for editing"**

2.3 Safety norms

Female students in Delhi are learning via awareness-based content on social media that they come across. Few of the examples that they shared were related to cyber security, menstrual health, and safety norms for women. "We watch these videos for awareness as well. There are videos on scams, what kind of scams are ongoing" (Girls from Jahangirpuri, Delhi). By following a rape incident in Kolkata, on social media the girls learnt about women safety initiates by government,

> **There is an app - 112."**
>
> *Girls from Mangolpuri, Delhi*

2.4 History and current affairs

Young people are forming political views, and understanding about their country and citizenship through social media. Many students in each state spoke about how they got to learn new information about their state, country, and history that they were not aware of before. This was gender-agnostic, and many students have been learning alternative histories through Instagram and YouTube. Young people are also learning about current affairs (not covered by conventional news media).

"We learnt about the King of Surajmal, from Haryana. He lived during the Mughal period, and achieved victory over Delhi. King Surajmal was the most powerful. We learnt history from Instagram and YouTube."

Students from an ITI in Haryana

"We received information on farmers' protest from the internet"

2.5 Motivation and advice on careers

Young people, specifically ITI students, follow motivational influencers to inspire them to reach their goals. Sandeep Maheshwari was one name that was mentioned in many FGDs. Students felt their teachers were not motivating them enough, and hence were trying to find advice online. Similarly, students were trying to seek career advice from these influencers too. Students in Delhi would reach out to the influencers in the hope to get some guidance.

2.6 Learning about futures

Students felt their course curricula focused on the past way more than the future. This made them feel that they may not be future-ready and made them apprehensive about their future education, career paths and the future problems they anticipate.

"In recent times, we are taught a lot about History. But no one is talking about the future. The schools do not teach much about the future, but they do have a separate subject on History. There is no subject related to that of the future, and future aspirations. There should be a dedicated class and subject, which allows us to improve on it, so that we face no problems in future. One should also have career options in it."
Students from an ITI in Haryana

2.7 Digital Marketing

A few students in Delhi learned Digital Marketing after listening to an influencer talk about it online. They built expertise in it and found associated part-time jobs. Another student from Mangolpuri, Delhi, did part time modelling and learnt about product promotions and digital marketing from the influencers he was following on social media.

2.8 Learning Facts about General Psychology and Colour psychology

ITI girls at Jahangirpuri, Delhi were drawn towards certain psychology-related facts that they had stumbled upon online. They had learnt how to read a person's behaviour through non-verbal cues which they considered essential communication skills. They also learnt about colour psychology which is to do with identifying personality traits based on the colour of their clothing.

"I like psychology. There is a page/account called 'Psychological Fact'. If we want to know about someone's behaviour, this helps. For instance, if I'm lying while I speak, I will keep looking the other way. All of this will matter in communication."
Girls from ITI Jahangirpuri, Delhi

"There are some colors which affect our mind. Those who wear blue and red are generally associated with strong personalities. Accordingly, we can predict one's personality."
Girl from ITI Jahangirpuri, Delhi

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Much of online learning is affective. Social media is not only a site of information, but a site of belonging, aspiration and identity formation. Young people engage with these platforms because they feel seen, entertained, desired, inspired, and competent - experiences that are often missing in formal educational environments. As described by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope, two conditions enable learning.[38]

Belonging: whether a person's identity and subjectivity is engaged, and

Transformation: whether this engagement broadens their horizon of knowledge and capability.

Social media creates these conditions perfectly. Because of the algorithmic design built to keep one engaged, learners from different backgrounds and beliefs find a hyperpersonalised, comfortable corner for exploration. Social media gives access to a huge range of information (even if a lot of it isn't verified), which helps young people explore and expand what they know, comfortably within the boundaries of their echo chambers. It is worth noting that this exploration and learning is heavily gendered. Girls face the double constraint of limited aspirations and digital surveillance, shaping the spaces they occupy digitally, and controlling what they learn and how they learn it. Girls do explore but only within the bounds of what is an acceptable gender norm - looking up content related to fashion, makeup, cooking etc. For girls, therefore, online learning renders them within two boundaries, one of acceptable gender presence, and the other of their preferred echo chambers. Furthermore, learning through exploration is more evident in urban areas, where students were more enterprising, whereas students in rural areas were most likely to wait for instructions from the educators.

Serendipitous discovery does spark new interests and uptake in skills but social media algorithms also shape what young people learn in less beneficial ways. The algorithm that introduces a student to financial literacy may also reinforce harmful gender stereotypes or expose them to misinformation. Unlike formal education, where curricula (ideally) are designed with developmental appropriateness and accuracy in mind, social media learning is largely guided by engagement metrics and commercial interests. While young people are developing critical skills through these platforms, they are also inheriting the biases, gaps and distortions embedded in the content. What needs to be understood is that, while these learnings appear spontaneous or accidental, they are shaped by algorithmic curation. Formal curricula, while not exactly unbiased, are at least regulated, and go through checks and balances. The algorithm, on the other hand, acts like an invisible, unregulated curriculum designer, continuously personalising what young people encounter. This has implications for what kind of knowledge young people access, and the identities they imagine for themselves. Learning through exploration is essentially happening within the confines of platform logics, and the platform is designed to prioritize sensationalised, emotionally evocative media over other content. Young people are, therefore, susceptible to encountering more disinformation in their exploration, which may lead them down echochambers.

There are contesting research outputs that outline the positives and negatives of incorporating social media into learning contexts. On the one hand, research suggests that integrating social media in learning contexts encourages participation, communication and critical thinking.[39] On the other, there is a view that social media negatively impacts school grades, and is largely distractive.[40] Whether negative or positive, it cannot be dismissed that social media is increasingly blurring the boundaries between 'outside learning' and 'inside learning' with students bringing their social media-acquired knowledge into the classrooms. This in turn, is shaping how

they receive information within the classrooms as well. Digital technologies are rapidly being adopted into Indian formal classrooms with classrooms becoming 'smart' - with the use of smart boards and educational apps to facilitate teaching and learning. The disconnect is evident between formal education spaces and informal social media learning. While technology is being adopted in educational institutes through state and educator interventions, they largely replicate traditional approaches that sit at odds with young people's meandering learning practices on social media.

Teachers and other authority figures tend to look at social media as a nuisance and dismiss its use entirely. This leaves young people entirely on their own, as they try to navigate and learn from the vast maidan of social media.

While the adults in their lives see social media as an evil, young people are arming themselves with skills like communication, critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving through social media, alongside alternate histories and disinformation. Suspending rushed judgments and finding ways to incorporate discussions on social media learning will serve the students better. The role of the education system needs to evolve into helping them make sense of the information they are receiving online, rather than just providing them with basic information. There needs to be a pedagogical shift in classrooms where brave, deliberative spaces need to be created where young people can unpack the information they gain online, and connect them to their lived experiences. When a girl in Bavla learns English through Google searches and a boy in Jahangirpuri sharpens his argumentation skills through Discord debates, they are engaging in legitimate learning that deserves recognition within formal pedagogical frameworks. What education institutions have to offer, in this case, is to teach young people how to build on these newly acquired communication skills by learning how to have difficult conversations, and practice conflict resolution.

Young people are increasingly identifying gaps that social media helps fill in traditional education. The challenge for educational institutions and other educational interventions is not to compete with YouTube or Instagram, but to recognize, challenge or validate and build on the learning that happens outside classroom walls. Traditional classrooms used to create shared learning experiences where students learned the same things together and made sense of information as a group. But now, algorithm-driven learning gives each student a different path based on what they've clicked on or searched for before.

With GenAI tools like ChatGPT and Gemini, this is bound to become even more individualized. Students can now get instant, personalized answers from AI without involving teachers or classrooms at all. **While this seems like it gives everyone equal access to information, it actually breaks down the shared space where people learn together, question each other's ideas, and build common understanding.** When everyone is learning different things in their own bubble, it becomes harder for communities to agree on what's true or to challenge each other's thinking. That's why it's important to create spaces for discussion in classrooms, so young people don't end up relying only on technology to make sense of the world around them.

38

Kalantzis, K., & Cope, B. (2005). Learning by design. Common Ground.

39

Ajjan, H., & Hartshorne, R. (2008). Investigating faculty decisions to adopt web 2.0 technologies: Theory and empirical tests. The Internet and Higher Education, 11(2), 71–80.

40

Greenhow, C., & Gleason. B. (2014). Social scholarship: Re-considering scholarly practic-es in the age of social media. British Journal of Educational Technology, 45(3), 392–402

Need of the hour:

01
Bridge Gaps Between Online and Offline learning:

Instead of replacing or competing with online learning, educational institutions should aim to bridge it. The focus should be to help youth translate online skills (beauty, fitness, editing, tailoring, design, coding, gaming etc.) into local income pathways, apprenticeships, or collective learning studios. They should be given the vocabulary and the confidence to name the skills learnt online.

02
Peer Knowledge Exchange:

Design peer-led skill exchange sessions/platforms where youth teach each other what they learned online. This recognizes and validates digital learning as knowledge, and moves away from the framing of 'social media as distraction.'

03
Teacher Guidance:

Teachers and educators should guide young people towards verified content creators to learn life skills/creative skills, and supplement their educational curricula, instead of shaming young people's use of social media.

04
Creating dialogic spaces in classrooms:

There is an urgent need for educational institutions to create brave, dialogic spaces where young people are encouraged to unpack what they are learning online, negotiate facts and challenge what they know.

05
Design Learning for Exploration:

Young people own what they learn if they acquire what they learn through exploration. As we attempt to create more learning experiences offline and online, special emphasis should be given to move beyond didactic and instructionist learning, to learning guided by exploration, serendipity and curiosity.

ZONE 3

All the (digital) world's a stage?

The Digital Agency Of Wallflowers and Brazen Explorers

Digital Spaces: Who gets to explore and who remains hidden?

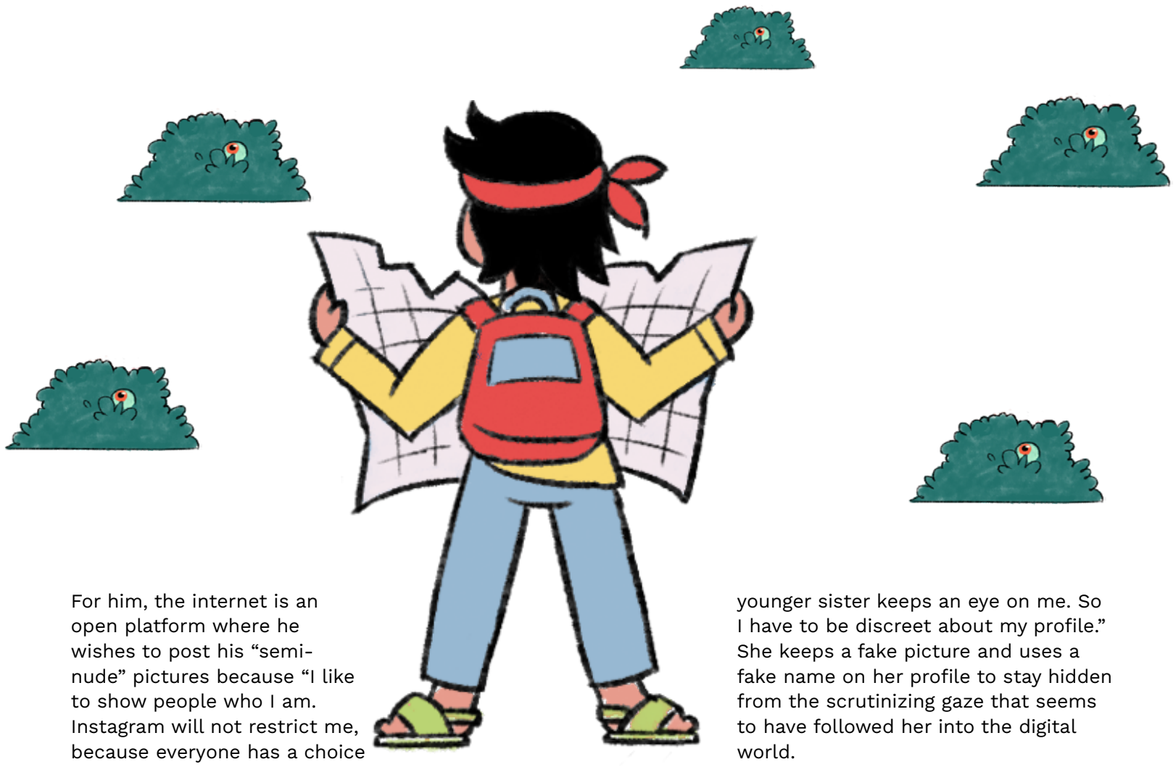
"Young people don't know how to use social media. You end up spending hours on it, but you can do good things on it as well,"

Soham is a 21 year old from Haryana. He enters the classroom with polished shoes, shirt neatly ironed and tucked in, buttoned to the top like a presentable, studious student. He is enrolled in a cosmetology course at a government ITI, 10 kilometres from his house. He talks passionately about becoming a cosmetologist in future, which is not commonly seen among boys, given its perception of a female-centric course. This is also reflected in the ITI, with most of his classmates being females. Being the eldest of three siblings, he sees himself shouldering a lot of responsibilities. But for now, his parents want him to focus on his education and hence, have not allowed him to work; unlike many of his neighbours and ITI friends. He is assigned duties at home to help his family. He gets up at 5.00 am and has to fill up the water tank at home, buys groceries if needed, and then takes a public bus to his ITI. He makes sure that he only uses his phone after he is back from the institute. He usually likes listening to orchestral music saying that, "It soothes my nerves." While most of his classmates exchange memes, chats, and reels with each other on Instagram, Soham is not part of these interactions. There was a time when he used to spend hours on social media, but recently his parents reprimanded him, took away his phone for a while and that made him realize that he was wasting valuable time scrolling mindlessly, when he could have done something substantial and useful for his career. "Scrolling on social media is self-sabotaging!" It has made him feel guilty for not being a good student, and for wasting his parents' money. He calls it "doom scrolling" now. He is proud to share that he barely spends an hour or two a day on the phone.

he reiterates. He has found social media platforms like Discord and Twitter, where he gets to chat with people from different countries, instead of just consuming content on social media, "Discord is better than this. I don't think Instagram is the future". He follows content writers, or listens to speeches by businesswomen such as Codie Sanchez, or political activists like Charlie Kirk, and that inspires him to become as eloquent and knowledgeable as they are.

He has made some international friends on these platforms, and they mostly talk in English. This helps him improve his communication and English language skills. He debates with them on different topics related to the US elections, social issues, business ideas etc. He is able to acquaint himself with their culture, much beyond what he would from just reading. He likes talking to people outside of his country, assimilating different perspectives.

His classmate Vikram from Delhi, has a completely different take. He sees social media as a playground, where he is free to explore the world, showcase his modelling skills; a platform so free that if you have the right skills and passion, you can become famous in just a click! He has been modelling from the age of 12, and has owned a phone ever since. His dream is to represent India at the international level, and become famous. He believes one needs to be honest in the digital world. There is nothing to hide. If one is hiding something, then it is only because they are cowardly or have done something wrong.



For him, the internet is an open platform where he wishes to post his "semi-nude" pictures because "I like to show people who I am. Instagram will not restrict me, because everyone has a choice and the freedom to show what they want." It is not just a space where he gets to showcase himself, but also to see what others are putting out. Like Soham, he too likes talking to strangers. While Soham seeks more knowledge-based connections, Vikram wants entertainment. He is in touch with six or seven "girlfriends" on Instagram and Snapchat. Sometimes these online connections seep into his physical world. A girl he was talking to on one of these apps, agreed to meet him in person, and he finally met her at a popular cafe in Delhi. He sees the internet as a gateway to opportunities, a confidante who gives him unrestricted access to the outside world.

Both Soham and Vikram considered social media as an open platform to explore opportunities, albeit in their own ways. This was in contrast to how girls from a government school in Narmada, Gujarat performed on, and experienced the same platform. Prerna, one of the students from Narmada group, used social media through her brother's phone. Whenever she would get access to it, she would either watch videos or sometimes, post stories on special occasions like her friends' birthdays or festivals. Another girl, listening to this, shared, "My younger sister keeps an eye on me. So I have to be discreet about my profile." She keeps a fake picture and uses a fake name on her profile to stay hidden from the scrutinizing gaze that seems to have followed her into the digital world.

Young people have to constantly negotiate their access to the digital world. This is not just limited to procuring a device, but also how their identities, social locations, and their positions in the society changes - relative to their degree of access to digital spaces. Gender inequalities are reflected in the ways that young people access, use and navigate these arenas. The social practices in their physical lives only get reinforced and replicated. Girls have a much more restricted and monitored access; discerningly treading on the peripheries of the online world, careful not to break the rules set up by the society or upsetting anyone. Boys on the other hand, have more freedom to take risks, be it chatting with strangers or exploring unchartered territories; where boys become the brazen explorers, while girls become wallflowers within this public sphere of the internet.

If the *digital maidan* is rendering girls to act like wallflowers while boys get to be brazen explorers, what kind of inequalities will it deepen? Who will be able to venture beyond the horizon, navigate, and explore, and who will be left behind at the peripheries of the digital world?

Entry into the Digital World

The vision of the Digital India Initiative launched in 2015 in India by the government, was to empower all citizens with digital infrastructure and digital literacy to be able to access e-governance services. With this, a number of schemes were introduced in India such as the BharatNet project for providing broadband services to rural households or the National e-governance Plan to make government services available on e-platforms. In 2024, internet penetration in even the remotest villages of India has exponentially widened. As per the Press Information Bureau (PIB), 95% of villages in India have access to the internet through mobile connectivity.[41] However, zooming into the gendered usages of the internet shows that the percentage of women with internet access still remains low.[42]

Our interactions with young people across different locations indicated a similar trend where the gendered access to the internet was stark. It is not just the overall access, but it was observed that young people's navigation towards gaining digital agency was also very unique. COVID-19 was a crucial moment for their entry into the digital world – shifting learning and education to online platforms in an unplanned manner. Students got their first phones rather early, as most of their classes moved online. This was mandated by educational institutions, thereby making it an essential tool for them to access education. Parents who had negotiated with their children for a later timeline for providing them with phones for leisure purposes, had to give them one much sooner than intended for 'learning purposes',

> **We would have got it, but only after some more time. We got it faster because of the pandemic,"**

shared the boys from Eriyad, Kerala.

Students also shared that parents often kept grades 10 or 12 as a milestone for giving them a new or even a used phone (but the device would be theirs to keep).

> **My parents have already told me that they will buy me a phone. Until my 10th standard I had a second-hand smartphone. But after my 10th, they bought me a brand new phone,"**

said a boy from Eriyad, Kerala. In such cases, boys would be the ones getting full access to the devices, while girls would either be provided with a hand-me-down phone, or had to share devices with other family members.

41

PIB Delhi. (2024). Universal connectivity and digital India initiatives reaching to all areas, including tier-2/3 cities and villages [Press release].

42

World Bank Group. (n.d.) Individuals using the internet.

Shared access

Most of the girls end up sharing their devices with family members – younger siblings or others for various reasons. It is usually women's phones that get used as a shared device in a household. When the mother's phone is not available for the younger siblings to use, it is usually the girls who have to share their phones with them. A girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi said that she occasionally had to share her device with her younger brother, when her mother's phone was occupied.

It is also mostly girls' phones which are used as primary devices for the younger siblings' education,

> **I have given my phone to my sister. It is my phone but she is in school and all her homework comes on it."**
> (Girl from Jahangirpuri, Delhi)

Gender is an important deciding factor when it comes to access. As per the report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), 2025, a higher proportion of women (58%) and individuals less than 19 years (76%) from rural areas used shared devices for internet access.[43] In our study, when it came to sharing devices for common household tasks like children's education or even leisure, it was often the women of the household – be it young girls or mothers, who had to share their devices. Men get to keep their phones to themselves, allowing them more digital freedom and privacy, aligned with what we see in the real world too. Young people, irrespective of their gender or location, shared devices with either their mothers or siblings. Since most women were home-bound, their devices were shared by the household. Wherever a father's phone was being used, it was mostly because their mother,

- Has a button phone, or
- Does not know how to operate a smartphone, or
- Does not have access to a device herself.

Parents' gendered access and usage percolated into the young person's usage behaviour as well. In Patthara, Odisha, boys used their mothers' phones because it was 'freely available' when compared to others'.

Girls would be more cognizant of this gender divide. A lot of the girls said that they have a single device between them, or they share their personal device with their mothers, since their mothers didn't own one. A girl from the Mangolpuri ITI in Delhi would hand her phone over to her mother after she reached home,

> **Right now the phone is with me, but when I go home I will give it to my mom. It will be a timepass for her."**

Interestingly, shared access to the internet did not just stop at sharing devices. Young girls in Narmada, Gujarat also shared Instagram accounts with their older brothers or fathers. They had marked out divisions on their profiles. While the profiles belonged to the male members of the family and the grid was their territory, girls were allowed to personalise and own the stories and highlights on these profiles.

Negotiating access

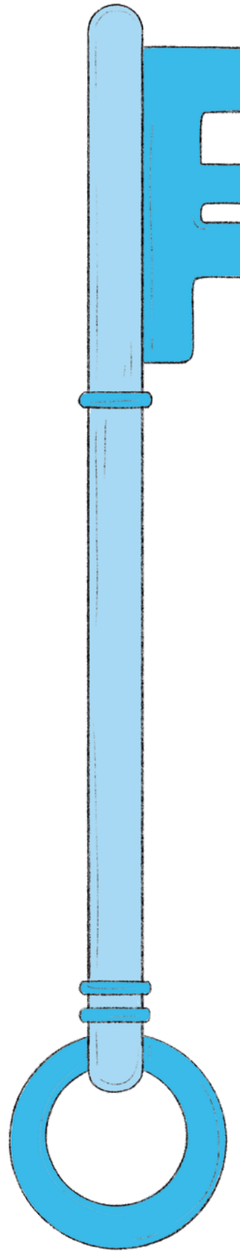
When the authority figure restricts or refuses access to the phone, we see that young people find their own alternatives to still engage digitally, as was evident with the participants in this research. They negotiate, fight, and find loopholes to gain access.

Trade offs
Younger siblings oftentimes have to make some trade-offs for a little screen time. Girls in Narmada, Gujarat shared that their siblings would make them do some chores in exchange for giving them their phones.

> **I will get it for a while, in exchange for some work."**
> *Girl from Narmada, Gujarat*

Conflicts
Girls with brothers often share their devices. This leads to quarrels as to who gets more screen time. They borrow their parents' phones,

> **I take the phone from papa, but my brother snatches it from me, he doesn't let me use it. Papa gives it to me."**
> *Girl from Bavla, Gujarat*



Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha also did not have their own phones, and often accessed social media through their mothers' or brothers' profiles. They would not post anything through these profiles, but did feel comfortable sharing stories – mostly because of their transient nature.

Sneaking their way in
Another way of getting access was by sneaking the phone away, without their parents knowledge. For instance, a girl in Narmada, Gujarat who was not allowed to use a phone, found a way to access it. When her father would charge his phone, she would quickly go and scroll on it for a while,

> **It will be kept on the table for charging. I will look at it then."**

Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha were not allowed to use apps like Instagram, but they still managed to find ways to use it secretly to avoid their parents' ire,

> **We get scolded at home. I hide and use Instagram. It is not allowed in my house."**

Their brothers have access to the phones, so the girls secretly use their phones, after the others at home are asleep.

43 IAMAI. (2024). Internet in India 2024.

JioFiber_896

Resourceful Fixes for Accessing the Internet

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Accessing the phone was not the only challenge that young people had to face. The high cost of the internet data was difficult for them to manage, since most of them came from families with limited resources. Most of the students in our study saved money to recharge their phones. School students would save money from what their parents would give them for snacks or travelling, as shared by a boy from Narmada, Gujarat.

Some of the girls, who had side hustles like tailoring and tuitions, said that they managed to pay for it with their own money. Though not everyone was able to do this, and many had to rely on their parents for recharges. This could be quite challenging, as they had to pester their parents or brothers for money to recharge their data packs.

Another way to get an easy and unrestricted internet, was to access WiFi either from neighbours or from friends. This was commonly observed across many of the young people we spoke to. If the neighbours were good, and had a WiFi connection, the norm was to share passwords. For instance, a student from Mangolpuri, Delhi spoke about how her brother's friend had shared his WiFi password with her brother, and now her entire family was connected on the network.

JioFiber_896

er_896

Neighbour's Wi-Fi (locked)

44

Phadke, S. (2011). Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets. Penguin Books India.

45

Drawing parallel to a story in Ramayana in which a protective line is drawn by Laxman to keep Sita safe from the societal harms.

JioFiber_896

Walking on egg shells amidst the surveillance

Young people's entry into the digital world is often accompanied by the monitoring and surveillance of their behaviour online, by authorities and other community members. For school students, surveillance per se was mostly gender-agnostic but even among them, the repercussions and punishment were more severe for female students. As they grow, male students gain more agency and control over their devices, with parents advising them not to spend too much time on the phones, but female students' device use is limited considerably within utilitarian purposes, rather than for leisure. The internet replicates itself as an extension of public spaces, and we can draw a parallel with Phadke et.al's 'Why Loiter?',[44] where the authors point that 'loitering' in the public space goes against the expected gendered performance of women. In fact, women's public presence should be productive and 'demonstrate a purpose.' Loitering on the internet which includes watching reels, chatting or putting up content, was scorned upon, reprimanded, and punished in different ways – depending on the perceived deviation from the gendered norms. Greater the perceived deviation, greater or more severe the punishment.

Self-Disciplining as a Way of Being

For girls, the regular community and family policing to protect the family's honour, makes them internalise restraint, and avoid risks or unfamiliarity. This self-discipline is also replicated in their digital lives. It inadvertently inhibits them from actively participating online. Since girls feel that their access to the digital world can be revoked at any time, they exist online within the boundaries they draw for themselves, much like a *'Lakshman Rekha'.*[45] This was more evident among older girls than in younger ones. This is possibly because of the fear of being married off, and/or concerns around prospects for higher education being affected. Even when they do use social media, they hide it from others.

The older generation sees social media as a distraction or 'self sabotaging' since they feel that the young end up learning something morally wrong or questionable because of it. Social media is associated with negative content that would 'lure' young people into socially unacceptable behaviours.

Family Surveillance

Girls were often subjected to 'surprise checks' for culturally inappropriate digital behaviour such as chatting with boys. This was to keep them within the boundaries of unseen norms that allow a modest presence on the internet, while keeping the family and community's honour intact.

> **They tell us to open our WhatsApp and show them so that they can read the messages."**
> Girl from Pilicode, Kerala

> **My parents also check my WhatsApp and the messages on it. They sometimes WhatsApp through my phone despite them having phones of their own. They check our chats with our friends."**
> Girl from Pilicode, Kerala

Since this has been routine, they anticipate this kind of surveillance, and devise ways to continue being on digital platforms without the risk of punishment. A girl from Delhi mentions,

> **My papa also uses Instagram. So I keep mine hidden. Whenever I lock it, it gets hidden."**

Families also keenly monitor how their young people represent themselves on the internet. Being too outgoing, or becoming viral is perceived as morally incorrect behavior. Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha wished to make dance reels to post on social media platforms, but were not allowed to by their parents.

Community Disciplining: Social Media as an Immoral Space

Shaming digitally-outgoing girls is another facet to consider. Apart from self-disciplining, girls are also disciplined by the community. As observed across two FGDs – in Haryana and Jharsuguda, Odisha, if there was girl in the group who openly talked about her internet presence and was a creator online, other students would try to shame her and call her *"Pagal"* ("crazy"),

> **"Yeh waisi ladki hai" ("She is that kind of girl")**, or try to shut her down.

Some of the girls didn't prefer to follow their brothers' friends as well,

> **This happens among boys - (they share with the male friend) that your sister talks to me."**
> Girls from Delhi

Boys from an ITI in Haryana had strong moralistic opinions about girls actively using Instagram. They thought that overt online activities would potentially harm a woman's reputation, when it came to her marriage prospects. Quite a few girls agreed with this opinion. Some of them even said they don't have an Instagram account, perhaps as a way to conform and placate them, with their adherence to the 'good girl' narrative.

Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha shared being constantly surveilled by their neighbours. If they would put up something online, people from their community would take screenshots, and show it to other community members to shame them.

> **Relatives (in the village) take a screenshot and share. (They'll say)...look what this girl is doing. She is wearing these kinds of clothes, she is doing these kinds of things - they talk like that."**

Girls themselves become part of community policing as they monitor the girls who are more active online – girls who may be posting content, or actively speaking to people online. For example, in a girls-only FGD in Jharsuguda Odisha, an older girl kept mocking an 8th grader because she was a regular content creator on Instagram, and also spoke to people on these platforms.

Consider this conversation in an FGD at ITI Rajlugarhi, Haryana:

Boy: In the villages, people think that if girls use Instagram, then it will cause issues during their marriage, they won't get good matches.

Interviewer: Due to Instagram?

Girl 1: Ma'am, a lot of people think that. People in the villages think this way. People in the villages say so when we make videos, reels.

Girl 2: I didn't know anything about Instagram.

Boy: Ma'am, there are a lot of girls who make such videos. They can do anything for fame. What about their future, when people will come to ask for their hand in marriages? Even if there is only one such girl who is making these videos, the parents think what if their daughter does the same thing tomorrow? It might lead to trouble (pointing towards the content creator in the room). Ma'am, I am not directly pointing to anyone. I am saying it, just in case something goes wrong.

Girl 1: Whatever he is saying is correct, because people here have similar thinking/mindset. Though, it should not be this way.

Girl 3: Not at all. Girls here do not do such things.

Boy: They do ma'am, and then they are not able to get married!

Girl 2: I don't have knowledge about these things.

Boy: Yes, she is anyway saying that she does not have Instagram.

Girl 2: I am not interested in it. I never even made an account, did not feel like it.

Boy: Ma'am, she is lying.

Girl 2: I do watch YouTube.

Girl 3: Us girls cannot be online because of men like him (all laughing).

Girl 1: If a boy makes a video, he does not receive bad comments! Then why is it that only girls are being commented upon?

The Fear of Misuse and Deep Fakes

Girls who participated in our study wanted to freely navigate social media. They wanted to be in control of their image, interaction, and all associated aspects of having a digital presence. The constant surveillance and monitoring of their activities online, often pushes them to the peripheries of the internet. It reduces their agency, and the ability to explore digital spaces to the fullest.

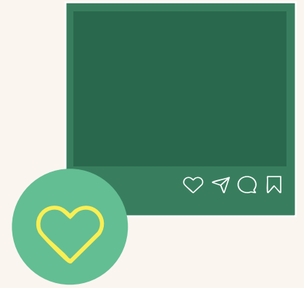
Fear as a means to control girls' behaviour online was commonly shared by the students. Since women's identities are so intimately intertwined with the society's honor, deep fakes were seen as the worst case scenario for girls. An ultimate punishment of sorts, for their online presence. The fear of deep fakes was more prevalent among girls primarily due to narratives fed by teachers, parents and the news media. Girls in Bavla, Gujarat were told by their school teachers about suggestive pictures of girls going viral online, which made them fearful and conscious of their presence online,

> **Our teacher said this had happened to a girl in Ahmedabad. She was asked to take off her clothes on video call, they took a screenshot of it, made it viral and blackmailed her."**

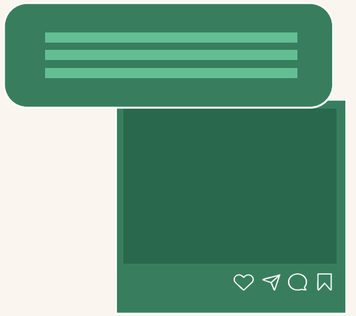
Institutions play an important role in reiterating the negative consequences of social media. Girls in Selamba, Gujarat also parroted the statement that girls' pictures on social media platforms are morphed. This was reinforced by their hostel wardens to deter them from internet use. Male students too knew about identity misuse and morphing, but this was mostly in terms of real threats of financial loss, rather than a question of honor.

The borrowed narratives around 'good girl' and 'bad girl' behaviour influenced their perception of acceptable and unacceptable actions on digital spaces as well. One of such unacceptable things was socializing with boys. In Jharsuguda, Odisha, it was frowned upon for girls to talk to boys or cultivate a relationship with them. They feared that this would lead them to problems. This wouldn't be something that 'good girls' did.

Passive Behaviour on the Internet

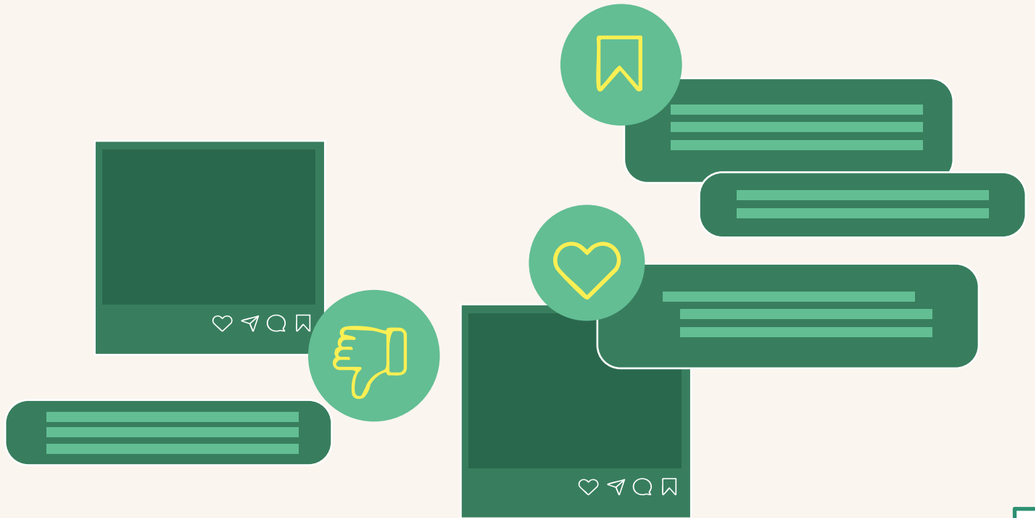


Girls were also more prone to be passive on social media so as to not garner unwanted attention. They deliberately made their presence as negligible as possible. An ITI girl student in Mangolpuri, Delhi said she reads the top comments of posts and reels she watches on Instagram, but never comments herself, even when she feels like it. This behaviour aligned with the online presence of a lot of other girls we interacted with. Commenting publicly was seen as inviting unnecessary attention to their profiles. Sometimes they only commented on their close friends' posts, to say that they looked good or with emojis, but never on public accounts. Girls in Narmada would not post anything on their profile, they would rather post it from their brother, father or older sister's profile.



Similar behavior was seen in young Adivasi boys in Narmada, Gujarat, who said that they don't comment on social media, not even on their close friends' posts. Instead, they said they would convey the message personally to them on chat,

> **We will tell them later personally on message."**
> Boys from Narmada, Gujarat



Masking identities

Additionally, girls had to be cautious not to attract the attention of 'bad people' or boys who would make unwanted advances at them. Despite girls not doing anything intentionally, the repercussions tend to be more severe for them.

This shrinks their online presence even further. Girls were prone to digitally distancing themselves from people who they knew in their offline lives, to escape community policing – this could be boys from their neighbourhood, or relatives.

> **There are some neighborhood boys, who I want to stay far away from. If they know my ID they will keep visiting it often. If my face is not visible, they will still be a little doubtful of my profile."**
> Girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi

Girls were more prone to masking their identities online by hiding in their profile pictures (uploading a mirror selfie with face covered or back profile), or putting something else altogether (one girl had an image of the deities Radha and Krishna). They would also ensure that their profiles are not public. They take many measures to ensure that they are not easily accessible, but still receive uncomfortable and unsolicited messages from strangers.

Most of them expressed worries about making their accounts public and revealing their faces,

> **I don't want to keep it public. Good and bad people will follow it. They will look at the photos and follow."**
> Girl from Bavla, Gujarat

Another girl from Patthara, Odisha shared that they were scared to connect with strangers online, because they feared how their parents would react if they got to know. Some were not comfortable uploading their personal pictures on Instagram posts. Older, urban young women in metropolitan areas seem to have more agency on how they navigate digital spaces, and more control over their access to digital platforms when compared to girls in non-metropolitan areas.

Women's Support Networks

The shared experience of women being punished by the community for asserting their identities or circumventing these norms, brought out instances of strong support networks for women. The girls in Mangolpuri, Delhi shared an instance where one of their friends' accounts was hacked, and she had to delete the account. They said their friends immediately notify them if they see unusual behavior on their account. Another girl spotted a fake account with her name and profile picture, and got 40-50 of her friends to report the account; the platform eventually took it down.

Gendered perceptions of safety

The concerns that boys expressed about strangers messaging them were around the fear of being fooled by men who impersonated girls to chat with them, or of getting scammed. Safety concerns on social media for boys at a Delhi ITI was limited to safety in terms of their family members getting to know if they were watching sexual or violent content. Unlike girls, boys were more concerned about perception and reputation management or safety. A few boys from Mangolpuri, Delhi reflected on being cautious of what they share on social media, so that others won't judge them as 'chichora' (a term commonly used in Hindi to describe a boy without a purpose or job, and who lacks maturity and seriousness).

> **Looking at the reels you post with your friends, people should say he has a good friend circle. Put a good reel with your friends – of you travelling somewhere."**
> Boys from Mangolpuri, Delhi

They also come across stories of scams and fraud that worry them. The fears expressed by boys belied tangible concerns, such as losing money or being hacked.

> **I have a neighbor, who had made friends with a person on Instagram and who kept messaging him."**
> Boy from Mangolpuri, Delhi

Gender Performances on the Digital Maidan: Women as Wallflowers and Men as Brazen Explorers

The entry into the digital world for young people is not a singular transition but a process of constant negotiation between desire and discipline, curiosity and control. What appears in policy as a question of 'digital access' is in lived experience, a question of who gets to own, use, and be visible online, under what moral terms, and at what personal cost.

Offline gender inequalities get reproduced in digital spaces, but with new complexities. Gender doesn't just influence what young people do online, but fundamentally shapes how they approach risk, learning, social connection, and self-presentation.
Girls navigate social media as 'wallflowers' where they are mere observers and do not actively take part in discussions. Whereas boys unapologetically take space online. Girls prefer to comment only on known profiles (friends and family), but not on public ones. Few others would prefer to direct message (DM) their responses personally, even if it is a close friend of theirs. Girls in urban areas were also disciplining themselves, but there were more of them willing to create content online. On the other hand, in a smaller town like Jharsuguda, Odisha many of them used Instagram, "Chupke se" (secretly) and were more judgmental about other girls who used it often. In Patthara, Odisha, many of the girls pretended to not know how to use the internet, but when given a phone were able to make reels quite easily.

Gender significantly shapes digital experiences. The restrictions imposed on boys are primarily age specific. Younger boys tend to have less agency in accessing and using devices, but as they grow older, these restrictions fade, unlike for women who continue to negotiate their digital agency. Amidst all the restrictions, young people find innovative ways to use phones, and in ways that would not get them in trouble.

This phenomenon mimics the division that happens outside the digital walls, where boys after they reach a certain age are supposed and expected to go out into the world, start performing chores outside their homes, while girls are expected to stay confined within the four walls. The digital maidan is as an extension of that, a life outside the hearth.
Patriarchal control is extended into digital spaces giving rise to digital patriarchy. The act of being online is constantly shadowed by the fear of being seen, misused, or misrepresented. These affective costs of vigilance, anxiety and guilt become part of the price of online participation for young women. This fear restricts their risk taking, venturing into unfamiliar terrains, and subsequently increases the gender divide of digital access. Across the three digital divides, girls seem to be in a more disadvantaged position as compared to their male counterparts. This also seems to have a compounding effect on the second and third digital divide. With less agency and freedom for digital exploration, it also means fewer opportunities to experiment, and explore the digital world. Even when girls have access and skills, their digital leisure is highly surveilled and monitored by the society, unlike their male peers whose digital leisure goes unquestioned.

Digital platforms are not just replicating the existing social reality where women are pushed to the sidelines in the name of honor and safety. It is also undoing years of efforts by the government, civil society organizations, and other agencies to break the gender stereotypes that hold women back from accessing resources, equal opportunities, and empowered structures and mindsets.

In a world that is increasingly becoming digital, with young people learning how to navigate the world. Since women are being discouraged to loiter and explore these platforms, they will be left behind. Unless this issue is urgently addressed, we will end up having a population of young generation with wider gender pay gaps, pushing women into lesser paid jobs. The impact of treating women as 'wallflowers' could have implications on their aspirations, the jobs they take up, and even managing relationship expectations with far less agency.

Need of the hour

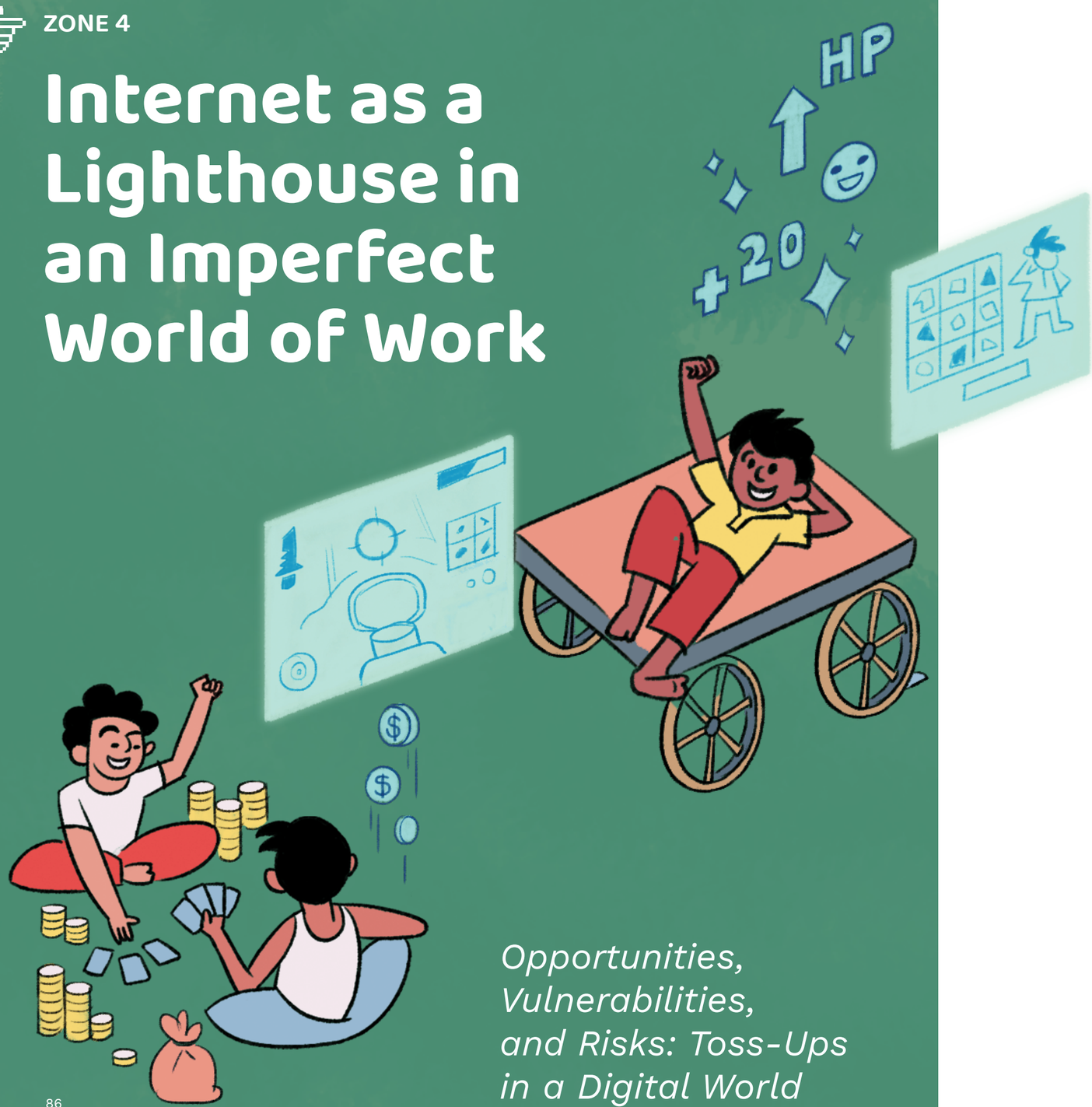
Gender-sensitive Platform Features:
Create platform features that are more gender-sensitive and make digital platforms safe for women. For instance, many female students preferred Snapchat due to a feature that informs them when someone screenshots their images. Such initiatives allow women to come out of the peripheries of the internet, and claim their space with more agency. Platforms should have features which encourage women to take risks online, explore, and loiter without the fear of repercussions.

Build Safe Spaces to Discuss Gender:
Develop safe spaces within educational institutions for young people from all genders, that allows them to freely express themselves, so as to bust the myth around gender stereotypes, and to let them ask questions without judgement. Boys and girls want to get to know each other, but systemic patriarchy keeps them from humanising each other. Classrooms need to make it easy for young people to understand and discuss gender.

Digital gender awareness initiatives:
Grassroots organizations, individuals, and/or educational institutions that provide gender awareness initiatives should acknowledge the digital realities of young people, instead of completely banning these spaces. Sessions on gender sensitization, mindful and respectful behaviour on these platforms, and safety measures on navigating through social media should be conducted. These need to be built on the lived experiences of young people within the digital space as well.

ZONE 4

Internet as a Lighthouse in an Imperfect World of Work



Opportunities, Vulnerabilities, and Risks: Toss-Ups in a Digital World

Prem is a 9th grade male student from Nani Devrupan village in Narmada, Gujarat. He goes by the nickname Babu. Gaming and sports bikes are his passions. He loves to ride the bikes of older boys in his village who he is friends with. Sometimes he and his friends create reels of him riding the bike and upload them on Instagram. Although he is underage, his interest in riding bikes is influenced by the older boys in his village.

Prem's life goal is to make loyal friends, who can understand and support him in his ups and downs. He opened an Instagram account to make new friends. He spends most of the time gaming and not quite as much on social media engagement. When he is on Instagram, he mostly watches funny reels either in Hindi or Gujarati. One of the pages that he follows is called 'Psycho Group.' He likes the humorous content that they post.

On most days, Prem, along with his 30 other friends in his village, gather around a temple after school, late in the evening to play Battlegrounds Mobile India (BGMI - an online game) on their phones till late in the night. His days are consumed with him playing either BGMI or Freefire. He also follows a lot of gamers on Instagram and aspires to be a gaming content creator one day. Ajjubhai, Raistar and Total Gaming are a few accounts that he follows.

Although gaming is the primary focus, this gives young boys in the village an opportunity to engage with their friends. They also share stories about their lives and of their village when they hang out. One of the things that Prem was wary of, was an incident that had happened to his friend. He had received a fraudulent call, and the person on the other end with a woman's voice ended up blackmailing his friend for money. The friend had been persuaded to recharge the fraudster's phone for Rs. 250. Prem says that despite such fraud calls being commonplace, quite a few people in his village have lost money because of them. Another common way he had seen people lose money is by gambling online. Dream11 was one of the popular games, where quite a few people from his village had lost money.

He recalls another story of a classmate from the neighboring village. It was a fake game called ASC. Someone from his classmate's family had won Rs. 8,000 through this game, and encouraged others to also give it a try. This game promised a doubling of the money invested, after a month. His classmate's father had invested Rs. 4,000 in it, and did not receive the money even after a month had passed. Others too had lost money in this game. Although Prem and his friends were careful to not try any of these, they knew how to play them, as they had seen the adults in their village try them.

Two hundred kilometers away, in a school in Bavla studies Keshav, a wide eyed boy in grade 9. He knows that he is the smartest, and one of the most articulate students among his peers, and does nothing to hide it. He has his father's unwavering support in pursuing his passions, and it shows in the way he conducts himself inside the classroom. If a teacher asks a

question, he feels compelled to answer. And if the question is about anything digital, Keshav is the boy everyone turns to. Teachers go to him to understand how to use different apps on their phones. In a group of boys from his own grade, he's the only one who knows about ChatGPT, and has started using it to aid him in his studies. He even gets ChatGPT to write stories for him. His father, who isn't employed at the moment, has always been interested in computer hardware. Even with financial constraints, he ensured that he provided his son with a well functioning computer system.

Three generations live in their exposed-brick house. Keshav's grandfather and his wife, his father and his mother, his uncle's wife, and Keshav. There are only two earning members in the family. The grandfather looks after their modest farm, while his uncle works in a factory far away. Keshav was supposed to follow in the footsteps of his uncle, but the world of social media showed him that other pathways are possible. Being tech savvy, he took to Youtube to learn about the world. In many ways, he was following in the footsteps of his father. His father also spent hours on Youtube, albeit on his mobile phone. Keshav was not privileged enough to have his own mobile device, so he had to make do with the computer.

While scrolling through Youtube, he stumbled upon animation as a field of study. He was an ardent subscriber of anime and watched many such shows. One fine day, Youtube's algorithm decided to show him videos on the know-how of animation. Keshav's life as he knew it, changed completely. He started learning the basics of animation, and soon started imagining himself with a career in this creative field. No one around him had pursued something like this, but he was confident that if he learns diligently, he can be the first in his village to be a professional animator. After spending hours watching how to make animation videos, he finally narrowed down on two channels that he considers as his Gurus.

One is Art Wing Studio and the other, 'India's Number 1 Animator', RG Bucket List. He even lobbied at home to get the earning members of his family to buy him a drawing tablet. His father finally made his wish come true when he ordered a Veikk drawing tablet, so that Keshav could practice his drawing skills.

Even with a long-term goal in mind, Keshav still wasn't sure of the path he had to take after grade 12, to make his dream come true. He feels that there are no universities that teach animation in India, and the people in his village generally pursue courses at ITIs. He feels that will most likely be his trajectory too. Nonetheless, he hopes in the next three years, he will be able to chart a pathway to make animation a viable career option.

Young people are exploring and taking inspiration from social media, which in many ways is influencing their future aspirations. The intention to pursue their interests like content creation or animation show how their idea of a career is being reshaped, and is moving beyond how society looks at careers in a traditional sense. Early access to digital platforms is encouraging students to explore different avenues, which otherwise would not have been possible. Students in other places also shared their interest in pursuing careers which might be considered non-traditional. In some instances, the lack of necessary support or guidance was 'inspiring' young people to take up illegal routes to earn money online, through gambling. The economic precarity, influence of older adults, and unrestricted access to mobile phones is also affecting them negatively.

In this reality, where young people are getting exposed to alternate possibilities, what would it mean for the education system to support this kind of curiosity? What do these intentional or unintentional explorations shaping their interests and aspirations mean for their careers in the future?

Finding alternate avenues in the digital realm

The world of work has increasingly become uncertain, confusing, and a cause for anxiety in young people. Their presence in the digital maidan is inadvertently exposing them to different career or money making possibilities, which were out of their reach otherwise. They were either engaged in the influencer economy, or were trying to find gigs through these platforms. We witnessed that owing to the lack of avenues, guidance, and a rise in unemployment, young people are turning to the internet as a mentor or an opportunity. They look towards it, to find motivation and explore new career options, often because they find this guidance and exploration lacking in their traditional education spaces, and their surroundings at large.

Young people's presence on social media is either shaping new aspirations, or is providing encouragement and pathways to pursue their already existing aspirations. They are also turning to social media to pursue their aspirations which deviate from the traditional career pathways, that the adults in their lives want them to follow. These explorations tend to give rise to an alternate life for some young people where they learn, exhibit their newly acquired skills, and find mentors that guide them – all on the digital maidan. Some young people also translate these mentorship to their physical spaces.

Young people also look at the internet as a space of opportunity which can help them earn money either through illegal means (gambling), or through content creation – both of which seem more achievable to them, compared to traditional career options. This is also stemming from a lack of resources, and they feel pressured to think of quick ways to earn money rather than a longer (perhaps more time consuming) vision of a career, which they see as a privilege that they do not possess.

Content Creation as a viable career option

“Blue Tick Hona Chahiye!” (“One should have Blue Tick!”)

Students find social media as an alluring space filled with exciting opportunities. Most of them recognize the monetary avenues that social media opens up, and look at it as a shortcut to fame and wealth. This was more apparent among ITI students compared to school students. Some of their career aspirations were also influenced by what they saw others do on social media. Boys at an ITI in Delhi said,

> **One should be famous, and have a blue tick. By posting content, one can earn a lot of money. A friend of mine has started creating it.”**

Similarly, a girl student at an ITI in Delhi, pursuing cosmetology, aspires to be a fantasy makeup influencer in the future. Other female students in Delhi also expressed their intention of using social media in the future to promote themselves or showcase their skills as a way to seek validation for themselves. For instance, a girl student, posting her work on social media spoke about validation-seeking,

> **People should know that you are doing a good job, that you are capable of it,”**
> she explained.

A few students in Narmada, Gujarat and Patthara, Odisha aspired to be gamers in the future. A school boy in Patthara, Odisha wanted to become famous by playing Freefire. He cited the example of a gaming influencer,

> **Amit bhai earns in crores by putting videos of Freefire. One can make a career out of Freefire.”**

It Seems Like a Better Alternative to Jobs?

Seeing unsuccessful career stories of their peers and other young people in the country, while contending with rising unemployment, students consider content creation as a viable, alternate career option within their capabilities. Boys in Delhi attributed the lack of knowledge on different kinds of jobs, and the absence of financial support to pursue their dreams as the main reasons pushing youth to create content. They think it’s a better way to earn money, as they see its potential. “One can start a channel and create different types of reel and videos. It is at least better than a job. You will be famous if you create videos on YouTube, and can earn crores of rupees,” said a boy in Delhi. Young people believe in the lifestyle peddled by the influencers, while factual data shows less than 1% of content creators are able to make a sustainable living.[46]

[46] Bagai, P. (2025). Influencers log out - when the likes don’t pay for the rent. Mint.

Some students were also skeptical about the unpredictability or the risks of failure as a content creator on social media,

> **Who can tell what the audience will like?”**

They realised that an influencer’s job is monetarily tempting but not easy. A lot of students were drawn to the idea of becoming influencers because of the monetary incentives, but they also acknowledged it to be a tedious process. Some students also pointed out the need for technical understanding to create reels or posts for social media, and realised that they do not have the financial means to own good enough gadgets to record content (phone, microphone, etc). For a lot of ITI students, the main challenge that was holding them back was the paucity of time. Many students expressed their desire to pursue content creation once they complete their courses at ITI.

> **I don’t have time to create/post reels. If I get a chance and time, then I will create another account and post reels on acting, singing there.”**
> Girl at an ITI, Delhi

Parental vs Personal

While many students see it as a viable career option, others also feel that it is not as easy as it looks. A school student in Patthara, Odisha believed there are a lot more obstacles for young people who aspire to become content creators, as it challenges the traditional career pathways, “Only those who are supported at home, earn fame/popularity.” A lot of young people, inspired by what they see on social media or around them, aspire to take up new jobs, far removed from traditional ones. But this comes at the cost of going against parental expectations for their children’s futures. To balance this, students often end up working towards reaching both the aspirations – personal and parental. A boy in Odisha who had gotten accustomed to dancing and music through DJs who played in his village, wanted to pursue this as a career option. Even though his father wants him to be an engineer, he secretly wishes to be a dancer, and is leveraging the internet and social media to do so. He also found a teacher on Instagram to seek guidance. He is doing all he can to fulfil his dream,

> **At home, no one would allow me to pursue that kind of work. My family wants me to do a government job, and then maybe I can pursue my dream.”**

Social Media as an Influence for Career Exploration

Since social media is a limitless repository of information, it is exposing young people to new career pathways or supplementing their existing knowledge about careers. It opens up possibilities for students - in terms of what skills they can learn in the future, and what can be monetized. ITI boys in Kerala spoke of possible career options and skills needed to pursue what they had seen online,

> **I have watched photo and video editing online. If we learn it, we can do editing on our own. If we learn Photoshop, then it will be of help in photo studios and all. I have just watched it, but have not tried doing it yet."**

Similarly, boys at ITIs in Delhi and Haryana were looking up career options they could pursue after their graduation from their ITI courses. They were building their career pathways through the information that they were receiving from social media channels.

However, exposure to non-traditional career choices on the internet did not promise a shift in career aspirations among female students. Although they were aware of possibilities, they may not necessarily be interested in giving them a shot. Girls still end up aspiring for careers that are bound by their gender, lived experiences, and restrictions. A school girl in Bavla, Gujarat said that she wanted to learn sewing in the future through the internet, and make it her profession,

> **After 10th class, I want to learn sewing. I will learn through mobile."**

Through the knowledge gained on social media, an ITI girl student in Mangolpuri, Delhi spoke about her interest in online trading, and how she has been inspired by young people online who are making money out of it. That said, she was hesitant to try it out, as she believed that she lacked the knowledge and the confidence to do it. Apart from aspirations around content creation, none of the female students who were a part of our research spoke about an intent to pursue non-traditional careers.

Students also felt that the vast amount of information they obtained online was completely useless for them, and made their career exploration even more overwhelming. **For many young people, social media has become a glaring space with too many choices.** Girls from an ITI in Delhi felt that YouTube was not very helpful in exploring career opportunities. Since there is too much content online, it makes them even more confused about their choices, "Nowadays, there is a lot of content on everything, and hence we tend to get confused. There is a lot of scope, and jobs as well, but youth do not know their interests." (Girls at an ITI, Delhi)

Social media support for Entrepreneurial Aspirations

Students in many places envisioned using social media to achieve their entrepreneurial aspirations. For a lot of ITI students, it was closely related to the trades they were pursuing. Although they did speak about working in other places to gain experience, they desired to be small business owners in the future, and social media played an important part in bringing their aspirations to life. A girl student from an ITI in Delhi who aspired to open her fashion boutique in the future wanted to use social media to promote her brand. She wanted to create accounts on multiple social platforms, and post content that her customers would relate to. She felt that a Youtube channel's community space would be more feasible for her to achieve this.

> **My boutique will be called Flawless Finds. I want to duplicate designer pieces, and sell them at a lower cost to people."**

Another girl here who was interested in singing said,

> **I want to create my singing channel on YouTube."**

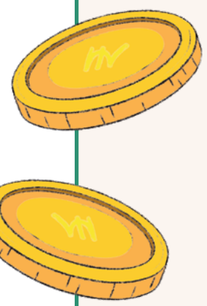
A girl pursuing food production trade at a Delhi ITI said that she aspired to create a channel that showed the everyday life of a hotelier, targeted at people who aspire to become hoteliers in the future. She wanted to be a professional chef, and a content creator. A boy from an ITI in Delhi wanted to become a model, and use the platform to do promotional ads. Similarly, a school girl in Bavla, Gujarat who wanted to own a beauty salon in the future said she would use social media to promote her fashion and beauty products online.

Finding Guidance Online

Young people seek guidance from others on social media, in order to pursue their interests. They closely follow and learn from a few influencers they like. Young girls in Bavla, Gujarat found Mehendi (Henna) design artists locally whom they followed and learned from, online. A male student in Delhi saw makeup transition videos which he learns and imitates on his own profile, while his friend takes financial advice from online influencers,

> **I had taken advice on stocks from a guy on Instagram. He gives good advice."**

Another boy in Bavla, Gujarat decided to become an animator, and found other animators that he could follow online, and learn from. This guidance seeking is not just limited to learning or improving a certain skill, but students also spoke about finding role models online. A boy at an ITI in Kerala said, "I have been inspired by the life story of Pele that I watched online." Some of the times these pursuits also get translated into gaining a mentor in an offline space. A school boy in Patthara, Odisha found a dance teacher who is also an influencer in their area. This serendipitous encounter led to the teacher tutoring him in his own home.



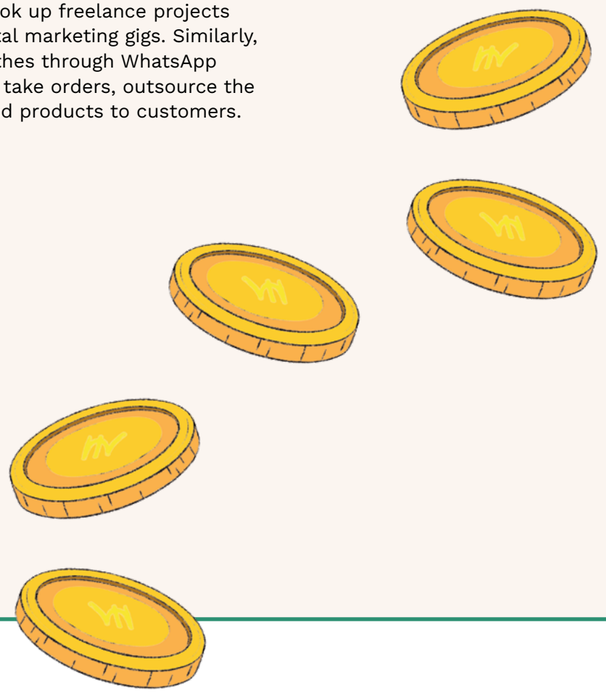
Internet as a source of income

Side hustles for extra pocket money

Young people find opportunities on social media, and on the internet to earn money from side hustles like influencer marketing, content creation, or even betting games that cover their minor expenses like phone recharges. An ITI boy in Delhi, influenced by the content he saw online, decided to create funny content to post on his Instagram,

> **My friend and I prank people, record it and post it. We get a few views like that. I even bought a costume for Rs. 10,000."**

Apart from content creation, young people are also utilizing digital platforms in various ways to make money. Students in Delhi took up freelance projects like data entry tasks or digital marketing gigs. Similarly, an ITI girl in Kerala sold clothes through WhatsApp and Instagram. She used to take orders, outsource the tailoring and sell the finished products to customers.



Digital gambling and economic precarity

Economic precarity has pushed some young people into digital gambling, which became another way for young people to make money. This was seen among school boys in Patthara, Odisha and Narmada, Gujarat. Sometimes the students themselves or the young people around them, would engage in gambling either online or offline. This was likely adopted from a prevailing culture of gambling among adults in their communities.

A school boy in Patthara, Odisha gambles with the game Freefire. He puts Rs. 50 in offline networks of gaming. They play against each other in teams of two and whoever wins, gets all the money. Boys in Patthara, Odisha also mentioned other games where a person can win Rs. 40-50,000 a month through online gaming. The boys see older men and older male siblings playing them,

"A boy in our village had bet Rs 50,000 on IPL. When he lost the money, he left home for 5 days but then came back."

Another young boy in Patthara, Odisha regularly earned money through an online carrom game. He sometimes made exorbitant bets, and once even lost Rs. 1,000. When his father learned about this, he forced his son to play again, and earn back the money. This trend was also seen in young boys in Narmada, Gujarat. They were learning how to gamble online from the adults, "We learn how to play on Dream 11. We create teams and bet money." While this culture was prevalent in young boys, young girls maintained a moral high ground and swore off such games. It is also important to note that the government of India has effectively banned the online gaming industry in August 2025.[47]

47

Aljazeera. (2025). India's parliament bans vast online gambling industry. Aljazeera.

Uncharted Space of Career Possibilities

As the pace of work changes globally, with newer forms of work emerging, the internet is becoming a space for young people to stay updated with new career possibilities and ways of earning. The socio economic background of a lot of young people who were a part of our research, compelled them to take up side hustles to support their individual or families' economic needs from an early age. For some students, this also stemmed from the desire to gain a certain degree of financial independence early on. Some of the school and ITI students were already involved in part-time gigs like tailoring, tutoring, newspaper deliveries, modelling, content creation, data entry, among others. Young people in our research were constantly looking for ways to make money through both digital and non-digital avenues.

The monetization opportunities that social media platforms provide, is luring young people by promising them quick ways to make money. The exposure to a few success stories of influencers online offers content creation as an alluring space to make easy money. Although young people look up to these handful of successful influencers as role models and base their aspirations on them, they are also aware of the unpredictability of this space. This exposure is affecting their long term visions of possible careers and lifestyles. Scholars argue that this monetization encourages youth to divert their focus from academic commitments towards content creation.

The growing cultural shift of academic excellence being overshadowed by digital visibility, threatens the long-term role of education as a pathway to socio-economic mobility.[48] ITI students, especially in Delhi who were among the most enterprising of all, were parallely pursuing multiple courses in academic setups. But they were still not confident that it would lead to job opportunities. This is also making young people skeptical of traditional career pathways. Hence, this larger cultural shift of embracing content creation or other non-traditional careers online can further be attributed to the growing lack of confidence that young people have in the formal education systems. Rising unemployment and the lack of alternate avenues are redefining young people's career aspirations in the digital world. ITI students also feel the pressure 'to make it', and tend to get lured by the idea of influencing, to earn a good salary. This can also be an act of actioning their agency to make the best of the circumstances they find themselves in.

In our interactions with students across states, boys spoke more about exploring the monetary opportunities that digital platforms provide. Among many factors, this can also be attributed to the early access to phones, and the agency within a digital space. The aspiration of becoming an influencer or a content creator purely for fame and money was expressed only by male students, a few of whom were already on that path. But the content creation aspiration, although among very few girls, was to leverage social media to support their careers in the future. Boys associated fame on social media with their personal or digital identity, whereas girls mostly associated it only with their careers.

Gender plays a very important role in how young people navigate this playground of opportunities in digital spaces. Career exploration gets heavily tailored online, based on a young person's digital behaviour. The serendipitous exploration of young people on social media is being shaped by the algorithmic, recommended content that is depriving girls from accessing or aspiring towards certain skills or opportunities. There is a higher probability for social media to influence a male student to pursue animation or online trading (unconventional careers), compared to girls. This can be attributed to the gendered risk-taking appetite – where boys are encouraged to navigate the unknown, whereas girls are punished for the same behaviour. Even when girls are exposed to content that falls outside their stereotyped gendered interests, they still don't feel confident to pursue that opportunity. Contrary to conventional ways in which educational institutions would approach career exploration for young people with a more gender neutral lens, social media is increasing that divide even further. Although social media is perceived to open up the idea of endless possibilities among young people, it is not necessarily giving the additional push required for women to consider unconventional career pathways.

On the other hand the unrestricted access to mobile phones and lack of guidance among boys is making them more vulnerable to the harms in digital spaces. Boys look at the internet as a space of opportunity which can help them earn money even through illegal means like gambling. Social media has become a world that is pushing young girls to stick to traditional career pathways as opposed to boys, but is also making boys more vulnerable to fall into the negative spaces within the internet compared to girls.

48

Kamraju, M. (2025). The allure of easy money: Educational consequences of social media monetization among youth. Social Values and Society (SVS), 7(2), 99-110.

Need of the hour

01

Informed guidance on careers:

Informed guidance where young people can meaningfully navigate the knowledge around careers that they gain on social media, rather than just being overwhelmed by it.

02

Promote unconventional career pathways:

Create spaces within educational systems to accommodate the exploration of unconventional careers pathways that students come across on social media.

03

Prioritise gender neutral career explorations:

Avenues for women to move beyond gendered environments, creating spaces for gender neutral exploration of careers.

ZONE 5

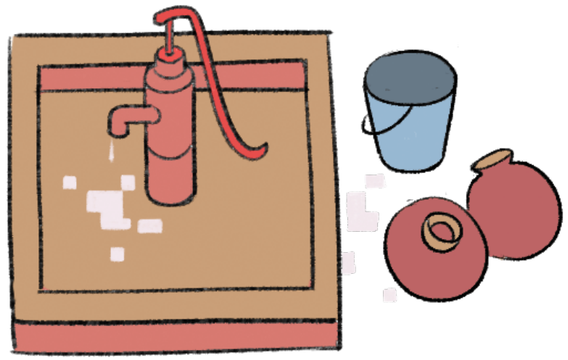
Algorithmic Identity Making: Claiming Space in the Algorithm

Beliefs and Perceptions that Cut Deep: Digital Worlds that Level the Playing Field

Situated 100 kilometers away from the world's tallest statue stands a small village of Selamba, Gujarat. The Model School in this village has 439 students enrolled for the academic year 2024-2025. Of these, 434 belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. The teachers in this school juggle multiple priorities, and are overworked. The Chemistry teacher makes the frustration clear, "We also feel like we should be telling students about new books, new developments in science, but we don't have time. We have so many admin tasks to take care of." Administrative tasks keep them away from classrooms. They are only able to enter classrooms between their assigned administrative tasks, which demand all their time. The overworked teacher story has troubled the Indian education system for a while now. "We have to digitise all the test scores on the computer, marks for each question need to be uploaded," she explains. The digital revolution hasn't pleased her, "God knows, what the people in Gandhinagar do with these marks," she laments, realising she's spoken too much in front of the unfamiliar researchers whom she just met.

The six regular non-Adivasi teachers seem to be sympathetic to their Adivasi students. They recognise that literacy levels are low in the district, but are quick to acknowledge that it's not the fault of the students. "They have to travel for 1.5 hours everyday to reach school; they are bound to get tired, and this will impact their studies." They recognise connectivity is an issue as well, and that the students are doing the best they can. There is a dearth of teaching staff too owing to the same issue. And they shared how existing teaching staff have to teach other subjects too, like Social Sciences. The Physics teacher has an interest in History, and the Chemistry teacher is inclined towards Biology, so they share the responsibilities, and ensure that students are not sitting idle.

Their voices trail off as the principal of the school enters the room. The teachers immediately stand up in respect, surrendering their agency to her. A fresh glass of water follows her. The school knows the long journey she has undertaken. Every Monday, she drives three and a half hours from Surat to Selamba, returning each Saturday. As she begins to speak, she refers to her students as the "other". She doesn't understand their cultures or customs and makes her unfamiliarity clear. It soon becomes evident that the principal does not share the teachers' sympathies. Deputed two years ago from Surat, she finds the stark differences in Selamba hard to reconcile. According to her, the students in Surat were much more "active" and knew how to make the most of the resources provided to them. She pegs the inactivity in Selamba on the parents' mindset. "Here the routine is to earn and spend each day," she explains, "If they earn money that will last them four days, they will not work till the money is all spent." In her view, this is what is behind the "lack of vision" in the students. They are not aspirational or imaginative because the culture and mentality of the community in this village holds them back. "When I ask them what



they want to be when they grow up, they say IAS/ IPS but the roadmap to this dream is unimaginable to them," she continues. The parents - small farmers and daily wage labourers, are too lenient on their children. When the students go back home, they engage in physical labour, "That's the custom here, they help their parents and earn Rs. 100 a day," she says.

The Adivasi customs are of great interest to her. Belonging to the Patel caste, she has immersed herself in the Adivasi culture for the first time. Continuing her observations, she notes, "Even their Gods are different. They walk to their Goddess' temple barefoot, situated closeby, every year," she explains the differences and similarities she finds, "But they also celebrate Diwali." She leans in to whisper, "They even keep two wives or husbands, and they all live together." While she is saying this, a student enters her room. She quickly composes herself and resumes her official duties speaking to the student in her booming voice.

The students, on cue, start the morning assembly. All of them neatly dressed in their blue uniforms, two braids tied with red ribbons. One student on the mic and the rest sitting opposite her, all harmonize one of the assembly songs in front of an idol of Goddess Saraswati and a mural of Mahatma Gandhi, next to the principal's office. The principal continues to express her helplessness as she tries to make the school better. Selamba remains largely disconnected from the digital world; no network service has been able to penetrate its thick jungles. Only Jio, the Reliance Telecom network, works patchily. Since the school administration is increasingly digitized, and the school is becoming 'smart', the principal has invested Rs. 12,000 in a Jio Broadband Connection. Students can connect to the internet through the smartboard now.

Three hundred students, most of them girls, stay in the school's hostel, and do not have access to phones. The smartboards also are accessible only when a teacher is present in the classroom. "YouTube is not allowed in the absence of a teacher because they come across all kinds of videos," the principal explains. Digital device use is not permitted in the hostel. When they go home, for 75 days in a year, they access the internet freely on their family devices.

Amid this structured control and institutional fatigue, the students' digital encounters tell a very different story. Radha, a 9th grader, belongs to the Vasava community, and is a diligent student. She wants to grow up to be a police officer to help the people of the Narmada district. YouTube and Instagram are her favourite apps. She shares an Instagram account with her brother where she posts stories, and her brother gets the grid. Whenever she goes home, she spends an hour a day on the phone. On YouTube and Instagram, she has found people who look and behave like her. She has to catch her breath as she lists out all the

Vasava community content creators she follows - Pooja model, Saaru singer, Heena singer, Trisha Adivasi - "The girl is from our community. She is from Narmada and very famous," she blurts. Using the researcher's laptop she clunkily types to find a video of Trisha. All the other girls gather around. As a video starts playing, they all point to the similarities, "This is what our house looks like", "This is our song, we will sing for you", "Our grandmother wears clothes like these", "We also wear these clothes at home", "We sleep like this in the winters", "This is the Bajra roti we eat", "This is how the jungle looks, we go there all the time", "This is called chauhara", they all share with pride.

They believe they can become famous just like them, but only after they complete their education. One of the students wishes to become a citizen journalist to highlight the problems of the village to the world, "Maybe if the ministers see my videos they will do something." Radha goes on to show the acclaimed comedian, Akku. "He is very funny, he makes us laugh so hard," she says. "He is also Adivasi, speaks about our culture and in our language," she continues. They all laugh at the screen because Akku has just cracked a joke. They find a sense of belonging in the content they see on YouTube and Instagram – a belonging which is denied to them within the school's boundaries. The platforms that the institution fear, become mirrors where the Adivasi girls see their own worlds reflected.

That said, they do realise that these platforms have their shortcomings. "It also shows bad and violent content," Radha says. The rest of the students giggle as Radha poses a question - "How do they make this content? And how does it come to our phones?" Other girls try to stop her, assuming she might have asked a wrong question. "Why do we get similar videos watched earlier when we open YouTube?" she asks. They all contemplate, maybe it's code, maybe it's something else, they are not sure. For them, YouTube is an app, not a company; it lives on the Playstore and not in a boardroom.

Radha believes that YouTube has to know their likes and interests because that's its job. They try to draw parallels between how they get to know their friends. "We form relations with our friends after we know some information about them, probably YouTube is doing the same", she wonders. A realization dawns on her that YouTube may not be trying to build a relationship with her, because she doesn't really know much about it. She worries that it may be giving information about her to others without her knowledge, but quickly dismisses this thought. "YouTube will not tell anything about us to anyone. However, due to monetary gains it can give away our information. But YouTube must be good, right? Why would it do that?" The algorithm which gives her a sense of digital belonging has many hidden layers that she is unaware of.

Many young people like Radha, who belong to marginalized backgrounds, are denied a sense of belonging in the education institutions, which largely cater to upper caste sensibilities[49]. In such a scenario, young people find relevance in social media which reflects their cultures and customs to them without judgement, belittling, or othering. They see it as an avenue to consume, as well as to create more cultural artefacts that are true to their lived realities.

What happens to a society when an entire generation's understanding of who they are is being validated by tech platforms, rather than by the communities and institutions around them? What kind of future does that create for their own sense of belonging, in the physical world they still have to live in?

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Kumar, K. (1983). Educational experience of scheduled castes and tribes. Economic and Political Weekly, 18(36/37), 1566-1572.

Crafting Identities Online

Early exposure to the digital world for the younger population influences the way they form their identities. Identities are not stagnant, not something that once achieved, remains as is.[50] It changes with time, with people we are interacting with, with locations we are situated in. In the increasingly neo-liberalized world, the concept of identity is ever-transforming, being challenged and asserted, influenced by the larger socio-economic and political shifts in the world. It gets more vehemently asserted in the times when the identities are challenged or threatened.[51]

India has a rich diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, geographies, caste, religion etc. However, not much of these diversities are visible in popular culture. As an entry point, social media creates opportunities for the socially excluded or marginalized to carve out and reclaim spaces, which in the physical world are dominated by more powerful communities. Young people from marginalized communities are adopting social media for connecting with others from their communities, sharing their views or concerns, and debunking myths or stereotypes about their communities.[52] [53] Social media helps people share their own stories, and form a network of publics that Zizi Papacharissi terms as "affective publics".[54] These are networks primarily formed and sustained through shared feelings and emotions on social media which in a way impact how people interpret events, and shape their political participation. Having said that, these "affective publics" can also be weaponized in creating emotionally charged content as memes, posts, reels etc.[55]

Young people in our study came from varying backgrounds, many of them belonging to the socially and economically marginalized communities. While some used social media as a platform to show off and assert the identities they most related to, others found this space liberatory in terms of expressing the parts of identity that are otherwise restricted. For instance, young people would seek out content that was representative of their cultures. While they felt the educational institutes did not give them space to express their cultural identities, they found that space online seamlessly.

Establishing religious identities

The role of social media in the growing assertion of hyper-nationalistic identities has been studied widely, and is becoming a global trend.[56] [57] In our study, young people found social media as a platform to form and ascertain their sectarian identities by putting up stories, phone ringtones, reels, or even profile pictures that help them identify with the groups they want to visibly be associated with. Much of these identities are crafted through social media, a space that has gained currency during elections, and to promote religious content in recent years.[58] For example, a school-going boy in Patthara, Odisha has used social media to establish his religious identity by regularly posting Sanatan Dharm content,

> **I first share videos of Hanumanji, and I follow it up with Sri Ram."**

They also put up images of deities like Radha-Krishna as their profile pictures as this effectively represents their love and devotion for the deities. A girl from Delhi also mentioned that she often watches content related to "Bhakti" (religious) songs online.

Girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha posted content related to religious quotes in the Odia language. They mentioned that they followed religious stories on some YouTube channels,

> **Jesus was killed brutally. You can search for the videos on YouTube."**

They also said that they turn to online cultural content for guidance and learning. They learn Sambalpuri songs and Odia Christian songs through social media. This kind of cultural knowledge gathering also helps them widen their understanding about the religion they follow, for instance, the difference between Catholic and Protestant Christians.

> **I'm a Roman Catholic. They are also Christians but they do consume prashad (offering), we don't. They also perform puja (religious prayer ritual), and wear sindoor (vermillion). I have seen it in real life."**

During festivities like Ramadan, students would look up videos of qawwalies (a form of Sufi devotional music), perhaps also more so because they cannot attend these in person. Such explorations on social media to intentionally find content that they can relate to, or can feel associated with, is indicative of how they see social media as a way to connect with their cultural identities.

Students have also cracked the functioning of the algorithm, and realise that there is a lot of scope for virality if the content includes topics related to Hindu Gods. A male student in Rajlugadhi, Haryana used to put photos and videos of Gods on his YouTube channel. He learned how to edit the images and collate them into videos, and add trending audios or devotional music/bhajans to it. They are able to identify which Gods are on-trend,

> **There are less videos of Sri Krishna, more of Mahadevji. However, Sri Ram is trending now."**

The internet also becomes an avenue for young people to seek religious or spiritual guidance. Based on their algorithms, it exposes them to spiritual Gurus and Babas (religious or holy men, spiritual leaders) whom they have not heard of before. But they watch their videos online, get inspired by them, and start following them ardently. A student from Jahangirpuri, Delhi shares,

> **I believe in spirituality a lot, like Radhe Krishna bhajan videos, listening to katha. I have to do chants of Srila Prabhupada ji. I follow channels of Vrindavan ISKCON temple, Delhi ISKCON temple, Srila Prabhupada ji. We can also follow many other Gurus online. You get to learn a lot of new things."**

50 Buckingham, D. 2008. Youth, identity, and digital media. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. The MIT Press, 1–24.

51 Ibid

52 Singh, D. (2019). Dalit goes online: The construction of identity and social space. Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, 9(05).

53 Nayar, P.K. (2014).The digital Dalit: Subalternity and cyberspace. Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, 37(1-2).

54 Papacharissi, Z. (2014). Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics (Oxford Studies in Digital Politics). Oxford Academic.

55 Udupa, S. (2019). Nationalism in the digital age: Fun as a metapractice of extreme speech. International Journal of Communication, 13, 3143-3163.

56 Udupa, S., (2018). Enterprise Hindutva and social media in urban India. Contemporary South Asia, 26(4), 453-467.

57 Schroeder, R., (2018). Social theory after the internet: Media, technology, and globalization. UCL Press.

58 Udupa, S., (2018). Enterprise Hindutva and social media in urban India. Contemporary South Asia, 26(4), 453-467.

Cultural Identities

Digital platforms become critical spaces for identity assertion and polarization, which is fundamentally transforming how people's gendered, caste, religious, and political identities are performed. Social media affordances such as content virality and hyper-personalization enable strong exclusionary identity boundaries. At the same time, we observe that young people also use digital platforms for counter-assertion – creating alternative spaces and identities where they challenge dominant narratives, and re-claim their identity. Platforms enable both intensified sectarian hate and unprecedented subaltern voice, often simultaneously. For a lot of students, online spaces are where they get to connect and explore content similar to their cultural identities. This is especially true when they have fewer avenues to express these in the offline world, or when certain aspects of their identities are stigmatized or marginalized by the majoritarian diaspora.

A show of community solidarity by using a code (number) to represent one's caste is another interesting way to harness social media. Students in Bavla, Gujarat have a code number on their Instagram handles to allude to their caste, Koli Patel. According to them, the number itself carries no meaning, but community members, some of the girls in the group, and their family members have it on their Instagram handles,

> **Yeh (1204) humara code hai." (1204 is our code).**

Upon asking their parents, it was found that the number 1204 reads as K-O-L-I, thereby representing their caste

Whereas for students from Narmada, Gujarat, social media was a gateway through which they could find people belonging to their community, with whom they otherwise would not have been able to connect with. Students shared how they sought comedic content created by Adivasi people on Instagram and Youtube, because much of what is available online, does not speak to their culture. Not just comedians, they actively seek out singers, artists, and other social media influencers who represent their culture on these platforms, allowing them to imagine themselves taking such public spaces when they grow older. They find belongingness and connection with their Adivasi culture, that even the educational institutions actively deny them.

Digital Personas

Through social media, students were also exposed to a number of identities which they did not know existed. They would come across content that would inspire them to take up a career which they had never heard of, or get influenced by personalities they encounter. These push them to find their own digital personas, or a digital self that they would craft with certain characteristics, specializations, skills, and aspirations. This is what they want to be known for in the alternate digital world. These are some of the personas shared by the young people as part of our study:

Chill influencer/comic:

"I want to make blogs on YouTube, on daily activities, whatever I do everyday. Nowadays, people suffer from a lot of pressure. I am a little funny, and hence, I want everyone to live like me. Chilled." (Girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi)

Self-love influencer:

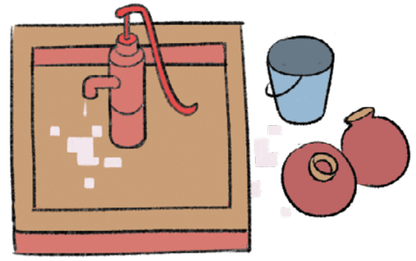
"I would put content on mental health and the importance of self love. I will put up my own video." When asked if she has done anything like this before, "I have created and saved it, but haven't posted it yet." (Girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi)

Citizen journalist:

"I want to make videos and content about us, our village. We face these issues - water, toilets etc." They want to upload all of this content on their YouTube channel, because, "When the government authorities will see, they will provide help." (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Village life influencer:

"In villages, we play cricket by making the pitch on the fields, that's what I want to show." He also said that he will teach people how to bat and bowl. Another boy said that he will showcase his village, give viewers a peek at the local flora, festivals, and fairs that are held in the village, "I will make videos on waterfalls, rivers, and greenery. Because people who live in cities do not get to see this much greenery." (Boys from Narmada, Gujarat)



Travel and nature influencer:

A lot of students wanted to make travel vlogs and share content about their travels. Some also wanted to show off their own villages and their lifestyle, their cows, farmlands etc. to the outside world, "I will go out to travel in the mountains, rivers and show those." (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Career influencer:

"How to gain success in a career, and how to study for it. One on career and another on education. I will create two different channels." (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Gaming influencer:

Another boy said that he wants to create a gaming channel for Freefire. (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Farming influencer:

"How to grow crops, rear animals, I will make that content." (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Education influencer:

A boy who aspired to be a math teacher said, "How to find mathematical solutions through mobile phones, I will make videos about this on my YouTube channel." (Boy from Narmada, Gujarat)

Social Media as a Platform for Expression: Wanting to Feel 'Seen'

Some girls devised ways to not be relegated to the sidelines as passive consumers, and instead asserted their presence by becoming content creators. This has enhanced their visibility in digital spaces. They would learn certain skills from the internet, and mimic those trends for virality. They look for content that gets higher views and shares, and they try to enact those reels, using the same hashtags and trending songs. A girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi tried enacting a "bhoot wali reel" (a horror reel) which she saw online. Girls from Bavla, Gujarat said they add Hindi and Gujarati songs to their reels, trending songs 'kaushik bharwar' in Gujarati and 'janiye likhiye' in Hindi.

They also said it was fun to learn the lyrics of new trending songs, and sing it together with their friends,

> **Whatever appears new (trending), we listen to those."**

Some used TikTok (before it was banned in India) to create dance reels, or reels where they recreated/enacted songs (Girls from Bavla, Gujarat). They even rope in their siblings if the act requires more actors (Girls from Jahangirpuri, Delhi).

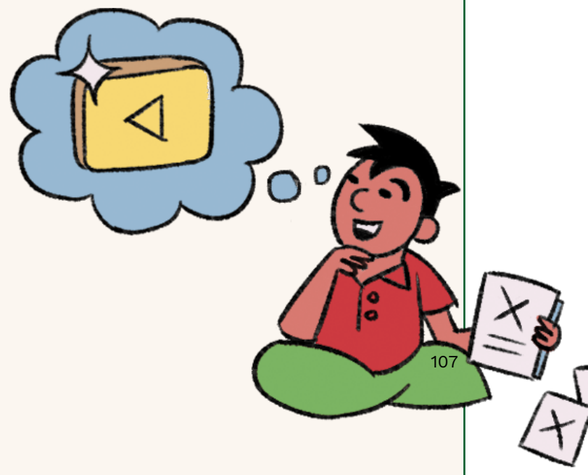
Girls said that they look up content that is relatable to their life experiences, their discomforts etc.

> **I like those quotes which are about girls, life and emotions, and about things which we face at our homes."**
> Girl from Mangolpuri, Delhi

Young people form and find identities through social media

The internet has seeped into the lives of young people from a very early stage of their lives, when they are forming their identities, trying to understand different aspects of their identities, and going through a crisis, like never before. The "self identification" Bauman[59] reiterates, is difficult in the modern era when the barriers are broken down, opening up diverse ideas and identities. In modern times, the struggle is not about how to find one's identity, but to choose among the plethora of identities, and moving between changing ones, so as to fit in with the status quo.

The youth today, who are bombarded with a world of possibilities and different identities, have an even more challenging journey to undertake. Students whom we interacted with were bombarded with content from across the globe. While this opened up a wide range of possibilities, it also added to the confusion, especially at a stage where they are in the process of forming their identities and worldviews.



From a developmental psychology perspective, Erikson identifies adolescence as a stage which is most crucial in terms of identity formation, where young people challenge their values and belief systems.[60] With the advent of technology, the idea of identity itself has become more fluid. For the longest time, technology was seen as a powerful tool that could change and challenge the norms around identities. Donna Haraway highlights that, while technology can help us challenge the 'natural' identities that are considered fixed and unchangeable, there is an element of choice. People have the right to choose what they want to show (or hide), and this allows them to transgress the boundaries set by society. But these identities are not 'neutral'. In fact, these get formed, transformed, and mediated at the intersection of technology and reality, giving them their own hierarchies and power dynamics. Thus, the identity that gets created online is an amalgamation of social realities and fiction.[61]

Young people in our research turned to social media to learn, explore, form, and express their identities in different ways. Some of the existing ideas and beliefs about different communities they are part of, get reinforced on these platforms. They seek, build, and sustain networks of people they find online, connected in myriad ways. It also opens up spaces for young people to explore their respective community and culturally-specific identities.

On the other hand, it also provides spaces for students to explore, and relate to experiences of their lives in a way that has not been made possible in any of the offline spaces. It becomes a gateway for them to express a part of their identities they are otherwise required to suppress or hide, such as local languages, Adivasi culture, and religious beliefs. Women especially get to explore their identities beyond the structure they are expected to confine to, and feel seen in these online spaces, much like Haraway's Cyborgs.[62]

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Bauman, Z. (2004). Identity. Polity.

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Buckingham, D. (2008). Youth, identity, and digital media. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. The MIT Press, 1–24.

61

Haraway, D. J. (1985). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century. Socialist Review.

62

Haraway uses the idea of Cyborg as a metaphorical figure which is a hybrid between a machine and an organism. Through this metaphor she shows how human beings are already intertwined with technology - with our social, political and all other aspects being shaped by it, and thereby rejecting the rigid boundaries between human, animal and a machine. It is impossible to be a pure entity deprived of technological embodiment. She claims that the properties of the cyborg break down the identity given to women, who have historically been only restrictive representations of their physical body.
See the full article here - A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century. Socialist Review.

Need of the hour

More space and recognition for marginalized identities:

Platforms should create more space for representation of different communities and supporting young people from vulnerable backgrounds to be able to express their identities on these platforms. This could be translated into their digital infrastructure and by creating user-friendly grievance redressal mechanisms that protects alternative voices.

○ ○ ○

Educational institutions and systems should be able to create safe spaces for the young people from different backgrounds to be able to find, explore and respect plurality of identities rather than being forced to 'fit into' a majoritarian ideas of a 'good citizen/ student.'

○ ○ ○

Educational Institutions and civil society organizations should use art, music, dance, food and other forms of expression for the young people so that they find avenues and ways to share their cultural practices, customs.

ZONE 6

Socialization in the Digital World

Expectations, Personal Preferences, and Relationships in a Digital World: A Tight-Rope Walk

Vidya was born and raised in a small town near Pilicode, Kerala. She lives in an ancestral house with her younger brother and parents. The front of the house reads, 'The house is blessed by Muthhappan', a deity commonly worshipped in the Northern part of Kerala.

Her parents proudly recall that even as a child, Vidya used to love drawing, and participating in co-curricular activities organized by nearby village groups or her school. She used to get good grades in school until grade 10 and her parents had high expectations from her, both of whom are working in the medical field. So, they asked her to take science in grades 11 and 12. Her brother is a medical professional too, and they feel that this field has more prospects than any other today. Her parents wanted her to join a medical college, and follow in her brother's footsteps. But Vidya had no interest in medicine, a realization her father had after assessing her performance at school. So they were amenable to the idea of her joining an ITI to do a draftsmanship civil course. They are more content with her hard work at present, "Now she has started studying well, she gets good grades."

When asked how the internet has changed children these days, her parents believed that it had spelt doom. "If you make use of it properly, the internet can actually be helpful. But only if you use it properly." They believe that it can do good for people who are studious and disciplined like Vidya's brother, who they think has benefitted from being exposed to the internet. But for Vidya, they opine that the internet has only spoiled her, exposing her to unwanted content. They feel that unlike their son, who is able to sift through the distractions online, Vidya is not equipped to do so. She is considered gullible, and is drawn towards non-study-related content easily.

During the COVID -19 pandemic, her parents had to provide Vidya with a separate phone since both were working, and sharing a phone was not feasible. They made her join many online coaching sessions and classes. But they complained to the researchers, "She kept chatting with people online, and wasted time doing unnecessary things." Vidya, in a meek voice, resisted these insinuations, insisting that she now gets good grades. At the time when researchers went to visit her, she did not have a personal device of her own. Her father declared that she did not need it anymore, as she must focus on her studies.

After the conversation with her parents, Vidya insisted that she walk with the researchers till the main road, and help them find an auto. Away from her parents, Vidya was more candid about her personal life. She mentioned that she liked a fellow male student from her ITI. He was in the same batch, but in another trade. What started as a generic conversation on WhatsApp or sharing reels on Instagram, developed into a romantic relationship between them. They would spend hours just chatting, getting to know each other, sharing mundane details. Everything was going well until one day when her parents checked her phone, and read their messages. They were furious at her for breaking their trust. Her parents did not want to send her to the same ITI anymore, especially while the boy was still there. They wanted to pull her out, but the boy said that he would drop out instead, so that she would not be punished.

She does not have a phone of her own anymore. She has lost that privilege. But Vidya is still in touch with the boy. She says, "Parents don't know, but I still talk to him." She gets to do this only when she goes to the ITI and uses her friend's phone to talk to him.

When young people increasingly meet their need for friendship and socialization online, in spaces that are deeply gendered, unequal, and unsafe, how do we intentionally create digital environments where they can form genuine human connections, without replicating existing harms that render them vulnerable?

Building connections in virtual spaces

One of the main purposes of social media has been to connect people. For young people, encountering and befriending people outside of their immediate social network has been one of the biggest boons. However, forming relationships and social networks on digital spaces replicates the gender appropriate norms that are practiced in young people's physical lives. The constant disciplining across different facets of their lives, reiterates the notions of a 'good girl' who focuses on her studies, does household chores while any kind of action suggesting 'romantic or sexual transgressions' is strongly associated with ideas of 'bad girls'.[63] This also informs the framework within which they operate in the digital spaces. However, both girls and boys find their own ways to navigate and form social networks. In the research 'How the world changed social media,' Venkatraman shows how young men in his field site befriend women from other Indian states, or even foreign countries such as Brazil or the United States. In parallel, it allows for women living in most restricted conditions, to find ways to create personal online relationships with people they would previously have not been able to encounter.[64]

In the digital maidan, young people are constantly coming in contact with strangers from different regions. We find that some students seek out these interactions intentionally, while others stumble upon them when they are navigating the online world. Students were making these connections in different ways, which were either casual momentary interactions, or something that evolved into friendships or even romantic relationships sometimes.

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Perceptions about Socializing Online with the Opposite Gender

Boys are not hesitant to form new connections online. On the other hand, girls rarely communicate with strangers online. They block the requests of accounts that they don't know of, or if they accept, it is with due caution.

Boys from an ITI in Haryana shared that they would often communicate with strangers, be it a boy or a girl, online. But they felt that girls are more secretive, and difficult to be friends with,

> **Girls are shrewd. But boys will get comfortable very quickly. Girls won't do that easily."**

Similarly, a school boy in Narmada, Gujarat said that it's difficult to make female friends online, because girls don't speak to anyone. Whereas ITI boys from Delhi said approaching girls has become easy because of social media. It's easier for them to search for a girl's Instagram profile, than to get her WhatsApp number in person. Boys at an ITI in Delhi mentioned that they felt extremely nervous in approaching girls in their educational institutions or in other public spaces, but online it wasn't that difficult. The 'gala sookhna' (nervous anxiety) had no place in the digital maidan of social media. These boys felt the stakes of approaching a girl were very low online.

> **The maximum they can do is block us", they said laughingly.**

Similar to their offline world, girls are distrustful of strangers on social media. As a rule of thumb, some girls immediately block unknown requests because they get around 20-30 such requests in a month. Girls in Mangolpuri, Delhi had a long checklist that they considered before accepting a request on social media. This applies for male and female profiles alike, because they feel boys impersonate women to get closer to girls. Some girls said that they talk to the person before accepting their request, and had devised careful strategies to find out whether the account represents who they claim they are,

> **If a girl's account is too 'chep' (clingy or annoyingly persistent), then we know that it's a boy."**

Their list includes analysing the ID and profile pic. They check their 'followers' and see if they have any mutual profiles. They consider this step as essential to filter out fake accounts. Even if all the above looks good, they are still hesitant, and may end up blocking the request. Girls said that they block accounts if they receive DMs from an unknown person's account. Some even said that they deactivate that option for their account. Even after they accept a request, girls think it is important to speak to the person and know their whereabouts.

Forming new relationships

Social media has also been a platform for young people to make new friends or romantic relationships, some of which has translated to connecting with them in an offline world. Interacting with strangers from different parts of the country or the world, and communicating with them, is exposing young people to different cultures.

Through social media:

A school boy in Narmada, Gujarat has made a friend on Instagram, a boy his age from Surat, with whom he converses occasionally. Similarly, a school boy in Patthara, Odisha has become friends with an influencer online in the same region. He said they exchanged phone numbers and talked regularly. An ITI girl in Kasargode, Kerala had made friends with a person after she saw their reel,

> **I had seen some reels and I followed them. Then I also DMed them and they replied to me."**

An ITI boy in Haryana said he had made multiple friends online,

> **"I have a lot of friends from Delhi, Chandigarh, Rajasthan, Hissar, Rohtak."**

Connecting with people through online groups also helped students with accessing study materials. A girl from Haryana said making friends online could be beneficial, giving an example of her sister,

> **My younger sister needed study materials for her classes. Then she met someone through an online group and he is the one who sent her the study materials."**

School boys in Ganjam, Odisha said they had made friends online from places like Puri and Bhesipur. A boy had particularly built a close bond with his online friend from Instagram, where they would share their concerns and console each other,

> **Sometimes, when I fight at home, I would talk to Naresh. Naresh says something nice and improves my mood. And sometimes, if Naresh is angry with his family or sad due to his friends, he talks to me, and I improve his mood."**

But on the other hand, some of the students who had made friends online said it was difficult to build closer bonds with people who they met online, compared to their offline friends. Due to concerns around safety, some students would usually refrain from sharing very personal information about their lives. An ITI girl in Kasargode, Kerala said,

> **I have never shared anything personal with online friends. So we can never become close friends."**

Students were also crossing national borders and forging friendships with people of different nationalities. A boy from an ITI in Delhi said that he had interacted with a girl from Thailand on Snapchat. Similarly, another boy had spoken to someone from Europe, and tried to learn about their culture. Girls in Haryana also forged friendships with other girls from different countries. This sometimes turned into a mentor-mentee relationship, where they would help each other understand, and navigate the world of influencing.

Through gaming applications:

Boys in Haryana try to make new friends online through dedicated apps for gaming. They had friends from different states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Chandigarh. Some students see this as an opportunity to exchange ideas,

> **What is their culture, what other things are there. All this is shared."**

One of the students had even met one of these online male friends in Rishikesh while on a vacation. When asked if they would be concerned about their safety when meeting these people offline, the boys said they were concerned about scams to an extent but were also confident in saying that they could judge a person through conversations very well. They also said they stalk the profiles thoroughly to understand what kind of a person they are,

> **Luckily I have not been scammed, thank God!. One gets to know the person's intentions, if you talk to them."**

Similarly, boys in Delhi also said they make friends with strangers while playing the game PubG. But they were also wary of the scams this could lead to.

> **We make random chat groups and talk to people. We make friends there."**

Forming Romantic Relationships:

School girls in Jharsuguda, Odisha shared instances where their friends met strangers online, started chatting with them, and formed intimate relationships. Sometimes these relationships would also end in break-ups. A girl said,

> **A friend of mine has gone through a lot of breakups."**

Sometimes these relations continue after reconciliation,

> **They break up online, and patch up online as well."**

In many places girls were hesitant to share any information about their interaction with strangers online. They were judgmental of other girls who spoke to boys online. They considered such girls *"Gandi ladki,"* even when they spoke to boys online as friends. The perception of 'bad girl' offline is translated to the online world. They shared examples of their classmates or people in their neighbourhood who they had seen engage in such activities,

> **She talks to a lot of boys, hence, she is a bad girl. She makes all the boys her boyfriend. She might have cheated on at least 20 boys."**

ITI girls Kerala, Kasargode said they never interact with strangers online, especially boys but also pointed out to their classmates who did,

> **There are boys in our class who do. We know that because they chat with girls online during the class time."**

Forming relationships in a gendered maidan

Social media is expanding the horizon for young people to make new connections, and interact with people beyond their geographical boundaries. Young people in our study were learning to form new social relationships in myriad ways. They were intuitively navigating how to communicate and form bonds with people from different regional and cultural backgrounds. But this experience of social interaction with strangers online is gendered, and shows opposing frameworks in how boys and girls experience or approach it. The “protection” that the computer screen provides, also contributes to the differences between offline and online behaviour.

The ability to talk to someone without having to see their facial expressions, and determine the consequences of what was being said, meant that people had the freedom to say what they wanted to, without hesitation.[65] In our research, older boys found it easy to approach girls in a digital space as there are no repercussions like the ones in the real world. But younger boys found it hard to connect with the opposite gender, as they believed girls didn’t talk to strangers that easily. On the other hand, girls feel extremely exposed, and are always cautious when connecting with strangers online. Most of the girls find this a nuisance that needs to be avoided, and hence have figured out different ways to do so.

The education of women, their physical mobility, and access to mobile phones, are seen to threaten the system of arranged marriage that maintains caste, class, and religious divisions.[66] The girls in our research who interacted with strangers online, were aware of the community and parental restrictions they had on them, and the consequences it would lead to, if they were caught. However, the girls who did try to interact with strangers of the opposite gender online, were met with strong judgement from their peers and communities offline. Some girls did show an interest in wanting to connect with strangers, while others completely rejected the idea. The ones who did connect with strangers online, often hesitated to speak about it, and kept it to themselves. Even in a digital world, girls only maintain contact in small circles within the network of people they already know. They are extremely wary of the people around them on digital platforms too, when they do take a chance to step out of their circle.

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Lessons for the Futures

Young people today move through digital spaces in ways that are shaped by their social worlds, everyday routines, and the constraints and freedoms available to them. There is no clear division between their physical and digital lives. It is woven into how they learn, imagine futures, build confidence, cope with boredom, negotiate relationships, and push against or accommodate family and community expectations.

Across regions, we saw that girls and boys encounter and interpret social media differently. Girls navigate heavy forms of surveillance, inside the home, in public spaces and online. Many build their presence carefully by following private accounts, reporting or blocking content, or choosing not to post at all. Their ideas of what is 'good' or 'respectable' behaviour online are deeply shaped by the moral codes of the offline world. Boys, meanwhile, interact more freely and more publicly. They are also more likely to take up or reproduce dominant masculine behaviours online whether in joking, trolling, or performing with confidence and power. Both boys and girls use social media to define what they think it means to be a 'good woman' or a 'real man', showing how gendered expectations are reinforced in digital spaces – leading to a form of digital patriarchy.

Young people also develop their own ways of deciding what to believe and what to ignore. While many are aware that misinformation exists, they verify selectively, and cross-check only when something feels unfamiliar. But they unquestioningly accept what aligns with what they already know or want to believe. Their trust in algorithms is layered. They know that social media "shows us what we like," yet many also feel that platforms listen to their conversations or anticipate their emotions. Their understanding of how content is shown to them is intuitive, experiential, and sometimes contradictory – but it shapes how they participate online. Many are oblivious to the way social media actually functions, and form their own folk theories in the absence of guided knowledge. The lack of informed understanding of platform logics is also seen in how young people place implicit faith in tech companies. This calls for an urgent intervention for algorithmic literacy, and creating spaces of dialogue where young people can unpack the effect of social media and algorithms on their lives. With the advent of GenAI and the AI hype pushing it into every sector, young people need to critically engage with this mega trend – to understand and reflect on the impact it will have on their lives and their communities.

Across contexts, social media plays a central role in shaping aspirations. Influencers, trends, and lifestyles seen online, allow young people to imagine alternate futures of independence, modernity, romance, or success. At the same time, these aspirational worlds also create pressure, comparison, and frustration. Social media also shows a world to young people that makes it seem like earning 'a quick buck' is easy, thereby distorting their understanding of building a pathway towards a career.

What emerges from this research is that young people are not passive recipients of digital culture, nor are they fully free within it.
They display tactical agency as they learn to manage risks, carve out small pockets of freedom, find information, teach themselves skills, entertain themselves, and stay connected. This agency is everyday, subtle, and adaptive but it is also uneven. Gender, class, caste, family norms and geography continue to shape what is possible.

These findings suggest the need to move beyond narratives that treat young people as either naturally competent 'digital natives' or as vulnerable, and at risk. **Instead, there is value in recognising their capacities, listening to their interpretations of the digital world, and working with the realities of their digital environments.** Media literacy, therefore, should not only teach critical thinking, but must begin with the everyday digital lives that young people already lead, and understand their pleasures, anxieties, negotiations, skills, and constraints.

Understanding young people's digital lives means meeting them where they are:

In the maidan of the internet, where belonging, aspiration, curiosity, and platform logics unfold side by side, every day.

Methodology

Our research covers nine field sites across five different states in India. The young people part of our research were school students aged 14 to 16 from Gujarat and Odisha, and ITI students aged 17 to 29 from Delhi, Haryana and Kerala. The places selected in each district were geographically diverse with a mix of urban and rural, with Delhi being the only metropolitan city. A total of 205 students were part of our research, with 110 male learners, and 95 female learners. The students came from diverse social and economic backgrounds.

The research employed a qualitative method of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in groups of ten, over a course of three days in each field site. The groups were divided on the basis of gender for more openness. The students were selected by their teachers, with a focus on those who used phones the most in their classes. Each FGD was facilitated by a researcher. All the FGD sessions with students were audio recorded with their consent. A total of four researchers were part of the entire data collection process. In places where the researchers did not speak the local language, the sessions were facilitated with the help of translators. The FGDs were supplemented by interviews with teachers and principals of the respective institutions alongside community immersions.

Our sessions aimed to create dialogic spaces for a more interactive informal engagement between students and researchers, and also to ensure equal participation of all the students in the group.

Drawing from ideologies of feminist standpoint theory, the focus of our sessions centered viewpoints and lived experiences of the students by understanding how they view the world at the intersection of digital technology. This method focuses on the 'outsider-within' phenomenon, where the outsider perspective of a researcher is used to elaborate the investigation of marginalized points of view. This helps to point patterns of behavior that those immersed in the dominant group culture are unable to recognize.[67]

The FGDs for the research were mostly semi-structured, giving an opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics that are part of young people's digital and non-digital lives. A total of five to six hours of interaction with students was spread across three days. Each of the sessions began with an icebreaker activity to bring students into the discussion zone.

- **Day 1** majorly focused on building a rapport with the students. This involved understanding the background of the students, their families, their likes and dislikes, phone activity preferences, and the characteristics of the village, town or city they live in. Students were involved in an activity called 'A day in a life of,' where they were asked to mark a regular day in their lives to ascertain how they divide their time, and where a digital device features.

- **Day 2** focused on understanding the digital behaviors of students, especially their usage around social media. Students were nudged to discuss various topics like accessing digital devices, content creation on the internet, socialization in the digital world, safety and privacy concerns, and content consumption with a focus on misinformation/disinformation.

- **Day 3** was designed to have activities that see how students understand the internet. This was an enquiry-led approach, where they were encouraged to think about the workings of the internet, and their understanding of algorithms. The activities also persuaded students to speculate on what the internet knows about them, and making sense of data.

The research also employed survey as a method to collect quantitative data in the same field sites - to understand the overarching digital behaviours of young people. Additionally, the research team conducted digital ethnographies of a few students who were part of the FGDs, and had active Instagram accounts. Their accounts were followed for a month to understand their posting patterns. The students along with the researchers were part of WhatsApp groups where they voluntarily shared videos and posts they liked.

Finally, this report uses interpretive ethnographic writing to examine how young people in India navigate identity, aspiration, gender, and social belonging in digital spaces, and how they make sense of their digital lives.

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State Profiles

State	Economy	Education	Employment	Device Access	Research Sites
Delhi Delhi being the National Capital Territory of India, enjoys many of the developmental and infrastructural opportunities, as compared to other states. The city reflects the influence of diverse communities due to high migration from different parts of the country - majorly Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Bihar.	The service sector dominates the city's economy. It is also one of the largest commercial centers in the country, as well as a hub of technological innovation contributing to the rising Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP).[68] The government encourages investments and growth in IT training, IT enabled services, telecom, e-commerce and related sectors. It is also planning to make the city 'the most preferred destination for startups'.[69]	The city has multiple different kinds of settlements including Jhugi Jhopdi clusters, slums or resettlement colonies, which remain underdeveloped and underserved.[70] Even though their education and income has increased with time, it still remains much lower than the broader population of the city, widening the gap between slum and non-slum dwellers in Delhi.[71] The literacy rate of Delhi is among the highest in the country. Delhi has witnessed many progressive initiatives in education including 'Happiness Curriculum', and programs like 'Buniyaad' and 'Chunauti' that were introduced to improve learning outcomes for students. Government initiatives are also focusing around digitizing the education content and infrastructure such as the 'AI-Mediated Classroom Project' to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into classrooms, to personalise learning, and ensure meaningful assessment.	Most of the city's population is employed in service and industrial sectors, however, female workers constitute a lesser percentage of the workforce. The dip in female workers is attributed to infrastructural issues, such as lack of clean public toilets, and free yet unsafe public transport.[72] Irrespective of the city being a hub of major sectors, it registered an unemployment rate of 4.6% in 2023-24.[73]	Delhi has the highest daily social media usage, where young people are spending an average of 3-4 hours per day on these platforms. As per TRAI report (2023), the city's total internet subscribers per 100 population is 246.55. This also becomes one of the reasons why many young people from Delhi are able to work in the gig economy, which requires basic digital literacy. There is a high aspiration among young people to get government jobs, and the aspirations among the youth are highly gendered as well.[74]	Three ITIs from Delhi were included in the study - institutions in Jahangirpuri area, which has a majority of resettlement colonies, and multiple recent instances of demolition and religious conflicts in recent years; and Mangolpuri which is an urban village, and primarily an industrial area. The third ITI was in Pusa Road (Central Delhi) with several educational institutions and coaching centers. ITI Pusa and Mangolpuri are included in a government initiative to develop them into 'Technology-rich Centres of Excellence'.[75]
Haryana A northern state of India, which is primarily an agrarian state known as the 'Bread basket of India', is now emerging as a service -sector and industrial hub.[76] Gurgaon (now Gurugram) being one of the major IT hubs in India[77] comes under the National Capital Region (NCR).[78]	The state's economy depends on the service sector, followed by industries and the agricultural sector.	Gender gap in education is quite prevalent with the female literacy rate being much lower than male literacy rates. While Gurgaon (bordering Delhi) has the highest female literacy rate, Mewat district, ironically bordering Gurgaon has the lowest.[79] The study location for this research, Sonipat (Rajlugadhi ITI) has moderate levels of female literacy rate. As per the ASER 2025, Haryana has performed better in most of its indicators as compared to its pre-pandemic times.[80] 3.5% of students from Haryana are not enrolled in any school in the age group of 15-16, an improvement from 6.8% in 2018. The report also highlights that around 18% of students in 8th grade are not able to read 2nd grade content (ASER, 2025).[81]	Haryana is one of the first and only state to have introduced Future Department to enable the state in addressing future focused challenges and equipping the youth in future-ready skills and identifying socio-economic and technical needs in future.[82] Even then, several studies have shown that the vocationally trained students in Haryana find it difficult to find decent paying jobs. Pay gaps are more evident for females and people in Scheduled Caste (SC) categories even if they have the same qualifications as compared to male and upper caste category people.[83]	In terms of digital access and use among children aged 14-16, the report finds that around 92% of students own smartphones and 88% know how to use it. Of those, 66% used it for educational purposes and 77% used it for social media. There was no significant gender difference in terms of overall phone usage, however, more boys knew how to change profile pictures, block profiles or change passwords on social media (ASER, 2025).[84]	Sonipat, which is one of the research sites for this study, is also part of the NCR region with many 'Industrial' clusters. Bordering the National Capital of India, Delhi, Haryana becomes an interesting range of development, bringing in more industrial and educational institutions, movement of young people from the cities to the nearby capital, but also withheld by practices that discriminate against the marginalized, especially women.[85] For the study, we have included Sonipat as an extension of Delhi NCR.

State Profiles

State	Economy	Education	Employment	Device Access	Research Sites
Gujarat The state of Gujarat lies on the western coast of the Indian subcontinent. The state capital is Gandhinagar while the largest city in the state is Ahmedabad.	The service sector dominates the city's economy while agriculture and related activities have the least share in the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). However, it is also one of the largest commercial centers in the country and a hub of technological innovation. Given its geographical location, the state has historically been a trade hub as well and that has also paved the way for the state's business friendly policies, allowing many large and medium industrial companies to set up their headquarters in cities like Ahmedabad and Surat.	The literacy level is only slightly below the national average (74.04 % as per Census 2011) though the gender disparity in education is quite high.[86] Caste is an important determinant, with Schedules Tribe (ST) category being extremely lower in literacy at 58%. There is also significant location wise difference, where urban cities like Ahmedabad on one hand have a higher literacy rate as compared to tribal dominated districts like Narmada.[87]	Similar trends are seen even in the employment sector. The state has high employment rate but female workforce participation rate stands much lower in both rural and urban areas as compared to male workforce participation.[88] A large proportion of women workers are self-employed and among them, majority work as unpaid helpers in household enterprises.[89]	In terms of digital access, 96% of students have access to smartphones, 82% can use a smartphone and out of those, about 18% owned it. This shows the common practice of shared devices among the students. Of the 82% of students who can use smartphones, 60% used it for educational purposes and 73% used it for social media (ASER, 2025).[90]	The two schools, which were part of the research study in the state of Gujarat were from the districts of Narmada and Ahmedabad. Narmada, which is situated in the eastern part of the state, shares its borders with Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The tribal majority district hosts the world's tallest statue, The Statue of Unity, and the Sardar Sarovar Dam, however was one of the most backward districts in the country, until recently it was added in the aspirational districts programme.[91] On the other hand, Bavla, a town located in the Ahmedabad district is primarily known as a business centre, and houses Amazon's largest sortation centre in India.[92]
Odisha The state of Odisha is located in the eastern coastline and has a large population dependent on fishing and agricultural activities for livelihood.	The manufacturing and mining sector also contributes significantly to the state's economy. The state has the third largest population of Scheduled Tribe (ST) with 63 different tribal groups, despite this, there is an extreme disparity between the ST and non-ST population in terms of economic growth and basic infrastructural facilities medical and educational infrastructure.[93]	The Odisha government's initiatives like the "5T" (Technology, Teamwork, Transparency, Transformation, Time) framework and efforts to establish IT hubs in Bhubaneswar reflect attempts to create tech-sector opportunities. 6.5% students are not enrolled in any school in the age of 15-16 and 41% of Class 5 and 33% of Class 8 cannot read at the Class 2 level (ASER, 2025).[94]	Owing to its long coastline, and geoclimatic conditions, the state is vulnerable to natural disasters which in turn impacts the state's economy. Despite the risks, agriculture, tourism, industries, and services sector remain critical to the state's growth.[95] Moreover, the state has initiated multiple projects in manufacturing, mining industry, and industrial infrastructure to attract diverse industries and boost further employment opportunities.[96]	About 83% of the students have access to smartphones, and 80% know how to use smartphones. Of those 61.7% used it for educational purposes and 77.6% students used for social media. In terms of digital tasks, 85.9% students know how to search for YouTube videos, and 93.1% were able to share it. However, 71% knew to browse for online information (ASER, 2025).[97] The digital penetration has even reached the remotest areas and communities.	Two schools from Ganjam and Jharsuguda districts were chosen as the field sites for the research study. Ganjam, primarily an agrarian district, also contributes to the industrial development of the state with its rich mineral resources. However, most of the youth population are migrating to metropolitan cities for better employment opportunities and due to the climate crisis.[98] [99]. Jharsuguda, on the other hand, is one of the most industrially developed districts in Odisha. Rich in natural resources, the district contributes significantly to the state economy.

State Profiles

State	Economy	Education	Employment	Device Access	Research Sites
Kerala The coastal state of Kerala is situated in the extreme southwest part of the country. Known as 'God's Own Country'.	The tourism sector significantly contributes to the state's economy, followed by the services sector, as it employs the majority of the state's workforce.[100] Unlike other Indian states, women form 37% of the total workforce, ahead of the national average of 21%. The state's economy is highly dependent on human capital, like in the fisheries sector, who are majorly the migrant labourers from the low-income states.[101] Moreover, the state's business reforms are among the best in the country, pushing the small and cottage industries to the forefront.[102]	In the education front, Kerala is one of the best performing states in the country with full literacy and only 16% of Class 8 students who cannot read at the Class 2 level (ASER, 2025).[103]	Even with the 100% literacy rate, the unemployment rate in Kerala is quite high.[104] To seek employment and better standards of living, migration to other countries like UAE, USA, Canada or UK is fairly common. A study finds female students migrate not just for employment opportunities but to escape social stigma and stereotypes that they have to experience in Kerala.[105]	Kerala is also the first fully digitally literate state in the country.[106] The state government has taken multiple initiatives as part of Digital India initiative and aims to build a comprehensive IT Policy and a dedicated Global Capability Centres (GCC) Policy to attract 120 GCCs by 2031, within major IT and development corridors. This is also reflected in the ASER, 2025, data with 99% own smartphones and 82.4% of the students who knew how to use smartphones used it for any educational purposes and 90.9% students used social media at least once prior to the survey week.[107] More girls used it for educational purposes and more boys used it for social media.	The two ITIs selected from Kerala were from Eriyad, Thrissur district and Pilicode in Kasargod. Kasargod is the northern most district of Kerala, bordering Mangalore with diverse languages and cultural practices. Thrissur falls in the central region of the state, with the majority of the population being Hindus.

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