2019-2020

THE IDEAL INTERNET

Understanding the Internet of Children and Young People in India

CONTENTS

I. SOLVING FOR EVERY CHILD

This report was put together in early 2020. Back then, we completed a whirlwind journey across six cities all over the country.

We sat in cramped rooms with groups of children and young people, breathing the same precious air, asking them questions about the internet- ***What were they up to? What did they think about it? How did they feel when they were logged in to the internet? What were they looking for? Were they able to get what they were looking for? Did they want more of it or did they want less?***

A more academic disavowal will follow, but one of the limitations of this study is that the youngest Indian minds are moving through a slipstream whose contours are not immediately familiar to those asking the questions from the other side of a generation gap or two. It took an act of patience from both parties, to really sit with each other and to listen, before we could begin to communicate.

On our part, we told them that their thoughts and ideas were important for the future of the internet. We told them that there were no wrong answers and that we wouldn't judge. We told them that they would be believed and that we would represent them in full and respectful measure. We asked them to take a chance on us. And the questionnaire was delivered in a manner that the children and young people had the agency of making valid and expressive choices.

In return, they gave us the gift of introducing our staid minds to wisdom, weirdness and beauty and even the occasional hint of darkness. To be met with the grace and generosity of children and young people is overwhelming. In those moments, as an older person, one cannot help but feel slightly better about the world and the future. (Just for a moment, before realizing that your own generation at various levels and in ways that can easily be avoided are, arguably, letting them down).

The Children Who Saw Tomorrow

With the benefit of hindsight and this report, one can state that the children and young people who participated in the project displayed more prescience about the state of the internet than policy makers and stakeholders especially in matters regarding access, disinformation, safety and other issues.

Nobody predicted a pandemic and lockdown but the critical state of India's internet had been experienced, observed and flagged off by children and young people in Agartala, Ranchi, Thiruvananthapuram, Bhubaneshwar, Mumbai and Delhi by late last year.

Not all futures need be predicted nor all prophets need balding crowns and long beards. Sometimes, all you need is to consult the fresh faces, ask like you mean it and listen with an open mind.

The Discontent with Internet Safety Training

This study also had its genesis in our general dissatisfactions of delivering an internet safety training module to children and young people. In presence of other comparable modules, as well as relevant resources available online, our module was on par with sectoral standards nationally, if not internationally. However, looking over three years' worth of assessment reports of pre and post-tests conducted during our training sessions, we realized that the internet safety training seemed to track better with groups of parents and teachers. It was the adults who reported high levels of interest and satisfaction rather than the children and young people (who despite our best efforts at design and delivery, gave comparatively underwhelming and unimpressed responses).

Even the experience of delivering the module corresponded to results of the pre and post-tests. With the parent and teacher training groups, one could sense the momentum building in the room while with children and young people we would live and relive a trainer's nightmare of watching key points and messages missing the mark in slow motion.

Children and young people seemed to see through the design of the module

For example, While discussing sexting, younger participants tended to go out on a limb and explain in detail how sexting can land you in trouble and how they know of people who have landed in trouble because of sexting. They end by solemnly declaring that it was definitely not safe to sext. However, for the trainer such incidents are so much water off a duck's back - nothing feels like it is going to stick. Even if one receives right answers, the engagement feels half-baked. Important conversations remain unsaid.

The Sheer Diversity of Expectations

Different training groups have different priorities and leanings. Parents and teachers seemed keen on issues like screen time, online grooming and how online contact may lead to physical abuse. Children and young people on the other hand leaned towards aspects related to safeguarding privacy and retaining agency. Parents largely wanted to understand the issue skimming over the technical know-hows but children requested deep dives into these areas.

Also, there was sufficient diversity in the apps used, patterns of behavior and the kinds of issues faced among various other factors that made it impossible for internet safety modules to be comprehensive, standardized and still relevant. And despite years of continuous iterations based on new knowledge, feedback from training on-ground and accounting for changing online ecosystems, we were not successful in deepening our module's engagement with younger groups.

In 2018, before a scheduled training, we put together and administered an informal questionnaire attempting to elicit children's expectations from an 'internet safety' module. The module was tailored and delivered based on responses received from a sample group of young participants. The training started to track better with the group and the interest and engagement saw a definite uptick. And that was the least important part of what the exercise revealed.

Comprehensive Internet Safety

Children and young people saw themselves in a spectrum of different roles online – consumer, creator, learner, lurker, worker, vendor – identities produced at various intersections of the on-ground, the

online, the private and the public. They desired, sought and indulged in a wide variety of experiences online. They were driven towards these experiences by a range of impulses and factors. The manner in which they responded to these experiences as individuals and groups was in itself an entire spectrum. And all of this diversity was further compounded by variations in their material realities.

Existing training modules and resources (including our own) constructed the 'online safety' discourse largely as a "being smart about how you handle yourself online and savvy about how you deal with other people (especially strangers who you meet online), and not fall prey to an online scam artist who takes advantage of your ignorance" (ISEA, n.d.) on "a new medium through which child exploitation, child maltreatment, and sexual and emotional abuse can propagate" (Stanley, 2001). These views find echo in handy frameworks such as the Cs of internet safety – contact, content, conduct and commercialism (Microsoft Perspectives for Policy Makers, 2014) and 'internet problems vs. platform problems' (Newton, 2019) that are frequently cited as the basis for modules and resources developed on the issue.

However, an attempt to be inclusive of children and young people's voices almost immediately contests and problematizes this conception. In their responses, 'internet safety' comes across as a multidimensional challenge that plays out over a range of indicators in an ecosystem that straddles the online and the on-ground and further proceeds to disregard the distinctions between them. It was not just about safety, protection and wellbeing but also about larger cultural aspects, privacy, agency and inclusion. Children and young people made a spectrum of often overlapping linkages around the issue of 'internet safety' - including prominent ones with gender, religion, caste, class, geographical location, family, friends, community and mental health.

The responses question the gaze which we (the adults working in the space of internet safety), and by extension, the modules and policies developed by us, subjected onto children and young people. How does a particular internet

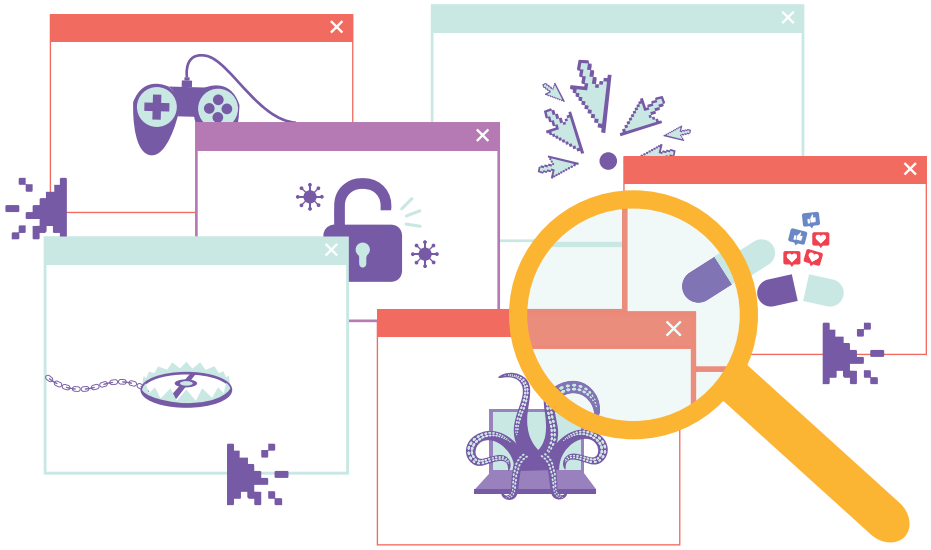
policy/module perceive of children – was it accommodating and inclusive or is it paternalistic and coercive? Was it tailored towards binaries like ideal child/bad child, boy/girl, below 18/ above 18 or does it take into account spectrums and continuums of identity and experiences? Did it give children's voices a legitimate say in the manner in which the policies/modules are developed and delivered?

It becomes clear that every key decision made about the platforms and internet, had an implication on 'child internet safety' whether it was barriers to access, blocking of apps and websites, availability of pornography to moderation policies. However, considerations of the same seem to weigh heavily in some issues while being disregarded in others. As long as patchwork consideration and implementation continues, comprehensive child internet safety will risk remaining unresolved even as policies, decisions and curriculums are formulated.

Another important learning was that when faced with issues online, children and young people have evolved, learned and used models of

mitigation, resilience and resistance. There was a need for internet safety modules to document, strengthen and disseminate these organically developed, practical strategies among others of the same peer group.

This study was not about how children and young people can be ideal or even palatable on the internet. It attempts to frame the discourse around internet safety in the voices of children. The hope is that stakeholders and decision-makers who are shaping the internet and its platforms will reflect on and be aware of what they must do to give children and young people their due in terms of rights, agency, representation, protection, a chance at a sustainable future and an open internet.



II. BACKGROUND

Previous research that considers a comprehensive view of children's interfaces with the internet such as Global Kids Online has shown that their actions and interactions in the online space have attendant risks and opportunities. They have further emphasized that risks may not always lead to danger, neither opportunities to success (Livingstone, Winther, & Saeed, 2019).

Over the past few years, India has witnessed increased reportage, dialogue and debate over suicide-enabling games, child sexual abuse imagery, technology-enabled sexual abuse, addiction, cyber bullying and loss of privacy among other risks (Singh & Bishnoi, 2016).

Each of these issues offer valid critiques of the manner in which online spaces function.

These issues take place within larger socio-cultural-political contexts of gender-class-caste inequalities, larger systemic failures to deal with forms of violence, media misinformation, state policy and regulation among other factors.

For effective remedies to be considered, proposed and implemented it is necessary to make a note of many socio-cultural-political negotiations that millions of Indian children who are online have to make almost every day.

III. AN IDEAL INTERNET

Focus Group Discussions with Young People and Adolescents Across India to Understand their Behavior and Competencies in Online Spaces

Through this study, we set out to understand the behavior of children and young people in online spaces and how they relate to the various contexts in which they operate. We also attempt to identify, clarify and define their competencies into a framework that can form the foundational basis for a more empowering and sustainable discourse on digital citizenship in India and across the world.

Objectives

- **Understanding online behavior of children and young people in India (in relevant sociocultural context)**
- **Understanding how children and young people perceive risk online**
- **Identifying strategies and skills that children and young people apply to overcome the perceived risks**

METHODOLOGY

Sample Size:
155 children and young people

Age Range of Respondents:
13 – 31 years

Average Age of Respondents:
17 years

Data collected during or The Period of Data Collection:
July 2019 & November 2019

Gender Break Up:
Number of boys: 73,
Number of girls: 78,
Identified as Plural: 4

Methodology and design

This qualitative research study employed an exploratory design as there is a dearth of comprehensive studies carried out in the Indian context in relation to children and the internet. Literature suggests that the majority of studies were either quantitative in nature or lacked an in-depth understanding of the children's perspective.

Sampling

The participants were identified using purposive sampling technique to capture diverse opinions of those marginalized from the mainstream. The participants warranted inclusion and were chosen deliberately in order to bring out the nuances otherwise unavailable in literature. Partner organizations were chosen according to their expertise in the work with the target group based on the subjective judgment of the researchers.

Tool of Data Collection

Based on the objectives of the research Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a semi structured discussion guide was used as the tool for data collection to develop a collective understanding of a shared problem in the voices of those affected by the problem. The discussions were conducted in a safe space for the participants to express their opinions freely. They were ensured that their opinions mattered and they had the right to be heard and participate in decisions affecting them as individuals and as a group.

Development of the questionnaire

Based on the objectives and in consultation with experts, a questionnaire was developed.

Informed Consent

Before every FGD, informed consent was taken from all the participants and their parents/ guardians.

Pilot Implementation

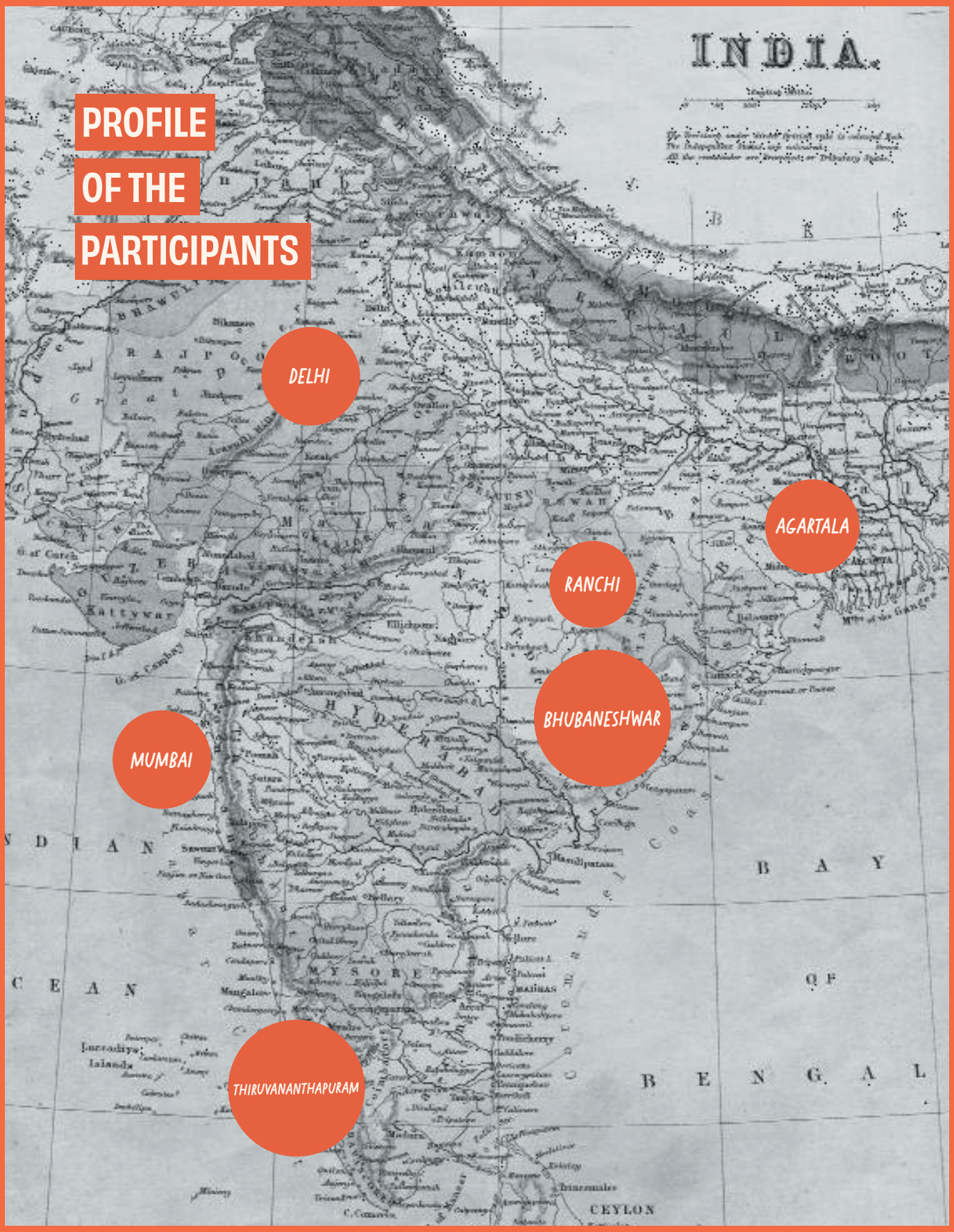
The developed questionnaire was first implemented to a pilot group in Mumbai in July 2019. Based on the quality of responses, the questionnaire was refined and administered to the rest of the groups across India.

Implementation

The implementation of the FGD was spread over 3 consecutive days in each location. On day 1, two separate groups divided on the basis of gender participated in the discussion. The queries and concerns from the discussions formed the basis for a customised training module on internet safety for each group. Over the next 2 days this module was delivered back to the group to ensure that the queries that emerged from the FGD were resolved.

Rollout

The final questionnaire was rolled out among children and young people across 6 Cities (Mumbai, Agartala, Bhubaneshwar, Ranchi, Delhi and Thiruvananthapuram). In Mumbai, the questionnaire was administered to an additional group which consisted of children and young people who identified as queer. The questionnaire was administered in the local languages of the children.


INDIA.
PROFILE
OF THE
PARTICIPANTS
DELHI
AGARTALA
RANCHI
BHUBANESHWAR
MUMBAI
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
BAY
BENGAL
CEYLON

Mumbai:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

20 children and young people (10 boys and 10 girls)

PROFILE:

The participants were associated with the NGO, The Naz Foundation. The families of the children had migrated to Mumbai from rural areas of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. Most of their mothers were homemakers, their fathers were daily wage laborers, vegetable/ grocery sellers, tailors and auto-rickshaw drivers. All the participants were attendees of private schools in Mumbai. 3 of the girls were working as paid interns for the Naz Foundation.

LANGUAGE:

The FGDs were conducted in Hindi and the participants were free to respond in Marathi or Hindi as per their language of convenience.

The Queer Group

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

12 children and young people (referred collectively in this report as 'The Queer Group') who identified as gender queer were also part of the study from Mumbai.

PROFILE:

2 out of the 12 people in the queer group were working professionals, 3 were in high school and 7 were college students. They represented Mumbai suburban, Mumbai city and Thane districts. Most of them were educated in private schools with the exception of 2 participants. One participant was a first-generation learner. Their parents were involved in occupations such as network marketing professional, central railways employee, police officer, college professor of economics, freelancer, housewife, businessman, school teacher at a local Hindi medium school, and a carpenter.

LANGUAGE:

The FGD was conducted in English as the participants were fluent in the language.

Bhubaneswar:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

29 children and young people (17 boys and 12 girls).

PROFILE:

The participants were beneficiaries of the NGO, Ashayen. Their families had migrated from various parts of the state of Odisha to the city of Bhubaneswar, in search of a livelihood. They belonged to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes communities. Their parents worked as rag pickers, daily wage labourers at construction sites or as domestic workers. 1 participant was a college-going girl and 11 (6 boys and 5 girls) participants were school drop-outs. All the others attended government schools within the city premises and came to the Ashayen community center after school to learn computer skills and for tuitions. Many of them were first generation learners. Some of the older participants also worked as daily wage labourers at construction sites and a few others were engaged in rag picking.

LANGUAGE:

They spoke Telugu, Odia and Santhali. The FGD was administered with the help of a translator who was well versed in Odia. For children who were comfortable in Telugu the questions were translated to Telugu by the facilitator.

Ranchi:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

27 participants (13 boys and 14 girls)

PROFILE:

They were beneficiaries of the NGO Srijan Foundation. They belonged variously to Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Caste communities and came from rural and urban areas in and around Ranchi. A few also belonged to the General Category. Their parents were farmers or engaged in daily wage labour at construction sites and coal mines. All the children were either in school or in college. There were 3 drop-outs and 13 of them were regular college students. Some of them were first generation learners. Those whose families were involved in farming also helped their parents with it.

LANGUAGE:

The children were comfortable speaking in Hindi and thus the discussion was conducted in Hindi. During the FGD, a representative from the partner organization, with whom the children were comfortable with, was present to

make sure that the children were at ease.

Thiruvananthapuram:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

18 participants (7 boys and 11 girls) were from rural areas of the Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala and belonged to middle income households.

PROFILE:

All the children were beneficiaries and active members of Kudumbashree's Balasabha program- a children's collective under Kudumbashree (the state poverty eradication mission). They represented urban and rural areas in and around Thiruvananthapuram. Their parents were engaged in farming, some were members of the Kudumbashree self-help groups while others were engaged in private jobs. All the participants had attended government schools. 5 participants were college students and 4 were working part- time jobs. Some took private tuitions while others worked as delivery boys for food aggregator apps.

LANGUAGE:

The FGD was conducted in Malayalam as the participants were fluent in Malayalam.

Delhi:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

17 participants (10 girls and 7 boys)

PROFILE:

All were beneficiaries of Naz Foundation and were also working with the foundation either part time or full time. The participants represented 2 districts of Delhi - South Delhi and East Delhi. All the participants had gone to school and were enrolled in colleges. All of them were first generation learners. All of them had attended government schools. Their fathers were engaged in unorganized labour, some auto-rickshaw drivers while others were shop owners. Most of their mothers were housewives. They belong to the Aali and Jaitpur communities. These were communities that migrated to Delhi from the borders of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

Agartala:

NO OF RESPONDENTS:

32 participants (17 girls and 15 boys). Data was collected from children in two government schools in Agartala in partnership with our network partner: Voluntary Health Association of Tripura (VHAT). The girls were in the 11th standard while the boys were in 9th.

PROFILE:

The participants belonged to middle class families with parents who were self-employed, owned grocery shops, worked as government employees or in private companies. 5 participants were first generation learners. All of them belonged to the West Tripura district of the state of Tripura which has the highest population in the state. They belonged to urban-middle income backgrounds.

LANGUAGE:

The FGDs were conducted in Bengali.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Most of the participants of the study belonged to urban settings barring some participants from Ranchi and Thiruvananthapuram who lived in the semi-urban/rural outskirts of the city. Thus, there is a huge scope for similar research studies to be conducted among children and young people living in rural areas.

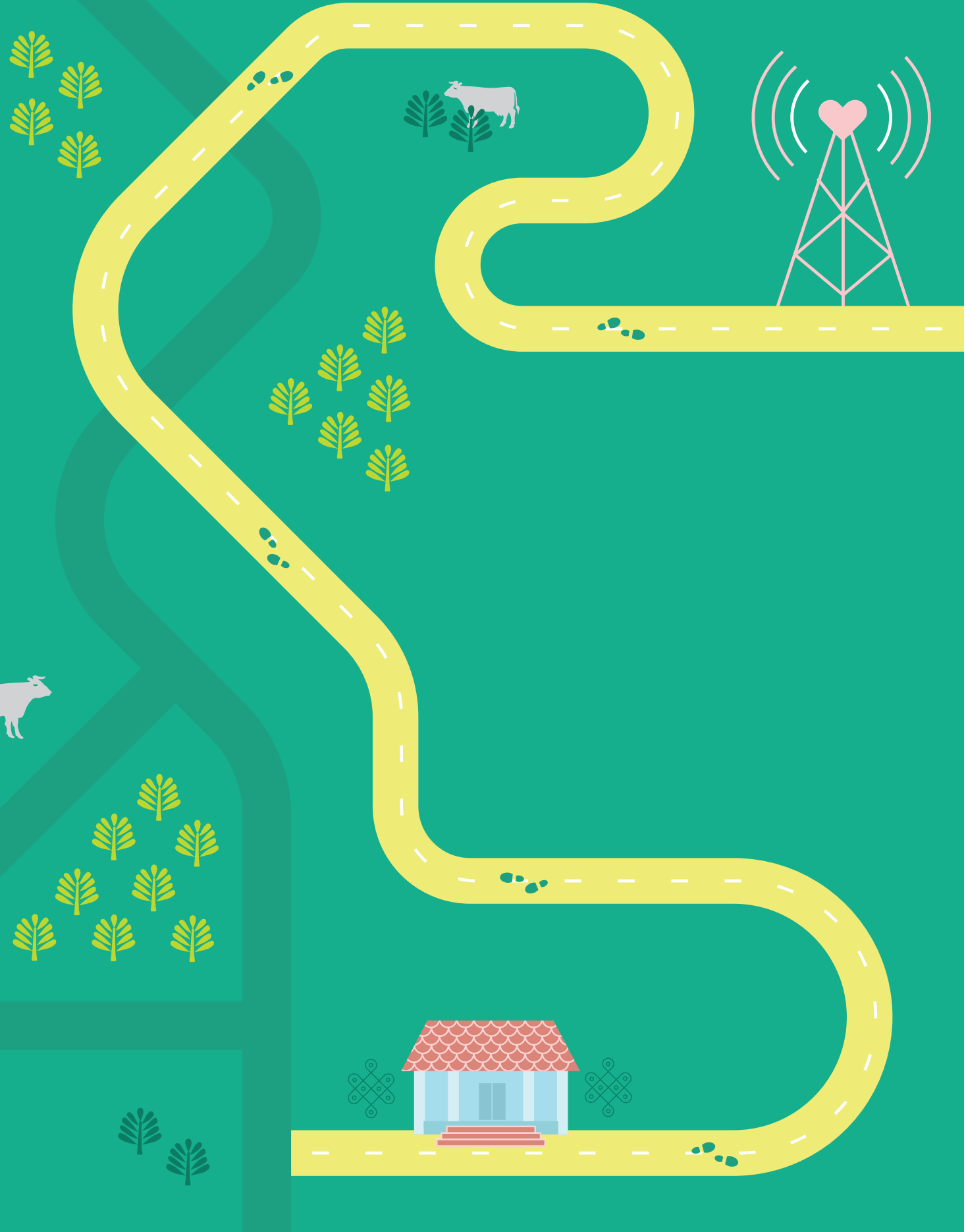
The study used a qualitative research approach with FGDs as the tool, thus the findings of the study cannot be universally generalized. The participants' religious or caste backgrounds were not systematically recorded hence the study has no religion or caste specific data. None of the other groups, except the queer group were examined for information related to queerness. Even the queer group was considered as a unit and the spectrum of queerness within the group was not delved into in all its richness.

Biases like the one arising from participants, cannot be entirely ruled out even though measures were taken to minimize them as much as possible. All the young people who participated in the study lived with their families and had some kind of support systems in place. There is much scope to study the relationship and interface of the internet in the lives of children and young people who are not protected by familial bonds or who live in institutions. In this study children and young people were the only respondents of the study. For a multi stakeholder perspective into the issue various other actors, like teachers, parents etc. can also be included in future studies for richer data and a holistic picture.

The questionnaire was extensive and took at least 2 hours to administer.

Though the participants were provided with refreshments and breaks, there is a possibility of the implication of respondent's fatigue on the quality of responses. Also based on the responses from the children and young people, additional queries were posed to them which were outside the questionnaire. This lack of uniformity across all groups posed challenges to statistical modelling. However, the report aims to present the overall results in a qualified and comprehensive manner.

The study intends to give a general overview of children, young people and the internet in India at a particular time. Given the dynamic, layered and multi-dimensional nature of the subject, there is huge scope for further research to not just update findings but also to conduct granular probes into various aspects of the issue.



IV. FINDINGS: ACCESS

Understanding the Level and Quality of Access to the Internet

*Familiarity with the Internet

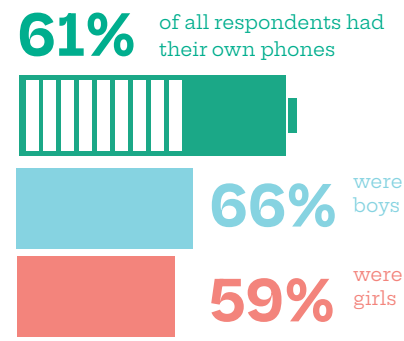
90% of the children and young people who were respondents were familiar with the term 'internet'. Others referred to it as 'mobile' or 'data' (which was also a term sometimes used interchangeably with 'recharge'). At least 2 respondents, both girls, used the term 'WhatsApp' to refer to the internet as their entire online experience was limited to the use of a single app.

On Mobile Phones in Homes

Almost all children accessed the internet through mobile phones. Almost all identified their homes as the location where they used the internet the most.

Divisions in Ownership of Devices

61% of all respondents had their own phones. 66% of all boys had their own phones as opposed to 59% of girls. Only 14% respondents had laptops and in all cases, it was a secondary device (in addition to a mobile phone). Only 7 respondents accessed the internet through PCs and just 2 used tablets.



Patterns of mobile ownership revealed a gender divide where not only did a higher percentage of boys have complete ownership of their mobile phones but there were also higher chances that they had not paid for them out of their own pockets. It was more likely to be purchased for them by their families. However, if girls wanted personal mobile phones, in most cases, they had to buy it for themselves. It was interesting to note that just 9% of boys had paid for their own phone as opposed to 21% of girls.

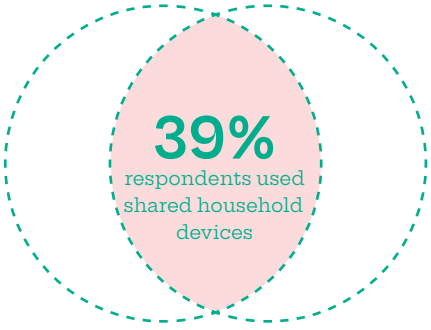
Along with gender, age and class were other factors that determined ownership of devices. Older respondents, those with jobs and those from financially secure households were more likely to have access to their own devices.

*As it was a precondition of the study, almost all the children and young people we interviewed and trained had some access to the internet.

Shared Devices

39% respondents used shared household devices, sharing it mostly with their mothers or siblings. If it was being shared among siblings, chances were higher that the brother, mostly elder, but in some cases also younger, would be having ownership of the device.

Time spent on shared devices was constantly negotiated and contested by family members with whom they are sharing it. Girls using their brothers' devices mentioned feeling a bit insecure about their brothers finding out and disapproving of their online activities. A few girls mentioned that such an incident had already happened with them and they reported facing mild (scolding) to severe (physical violence) repercussions. Many of them lost access to their phones temporarily.



27% respondents mentioned paying for their data recharges out of their own pocket and on average they would spend around Rs. 150/- a month and the preference would be for an unlimited data pack.

Costs of Connectivity

Almost all respondents (and their families) incurred expenses for internet access. Most relied on mobile data for internet access. Only 5% had broadband connections. 28% of children and young people regularly relied on public Wi-Fi wherever available. 27% respondents mentioned paying for their data recharges out of their own pocket and on average they would spend around Rs. 150/- a month and the preference would be for an unlimited data pack.

Similar to access to devices, girls, younger respondents and those belonging to financially vulnerable families faced greater challenges in paying for connectivity.

"I am the eldest daughter in the family. When I was younger my parents were not aware of the internet. I was the *first* to get to know about it from my friends. I went to a cybercafé and I learnt about it. And then I told my family members about it and also helped my younger siblings know about it so it could be helpful in their schoolwork."

37%
of respondents were the first in their families to access the internet and many of them have played an active role in educating their family members including parents and younger siblings about the internet.

Not Necessarily Digital Natives

At least 70% of the respondents first accessed the internet because their schools had asked them to do so in the context of a project. 37% respondents were the first in their families to access the internet and many of them have played an active role in educating their family members including parents and younger siblings about the internet. The remaining were introduced to it by their friends, followed by the nearby community members and a few by family.

While there is a tendency in research and reportage in India to frame the younger generation as 'digital natives', a large portion of new users in India continue to be 'digital migrants' and were the first generations in their families to access online spaces (Prensky, 2001).

The Socio-Spatial Divides in The Quality of Access

"I don't get a good connection in the place where I stay, so I can never access the internet indoors. I always have to walk away from my home to access the internet."

This statement, echoed by respondents across cities, revealed a stark socio-spatial divide in internet access. To put it simply, if you lived in a rough part of town, chances were that your quality of internet access was bound to be rough.

It was striking to observe how the respondents in the Mumbai queer group, who largely came from mostly middle-class backgrounds seemed to share common dimensions of online space, with respect to better quality internet as well as multiple points of access, with the middle-class respondents from Agartala than their peers who lived in more marginalized pockets of Mumbai.

On the other hand, the respondents from Bhubaneswar and Ranchi who belonged to the most marginalized communities not only had poor access and quality of internet but they also had to undergo a certain amount of hardship in order to gain access.

"There is no connection in my area. If you walk 5 kilometers to the main road and then a little ahead, there is a free public wi-fi spot. I sit there for a while, download some videos onto YouTube and then walk back to my house. Then we as a family sit together and watch whatever I have downloaded for the day."

Travelling some distance for access was not an uncommon experience especially among the children and young people who belonged to marginalized communities that lived near railway stations and bus depots with assured free public Wi- Fi.

The respondents lacking easy access also mentioned having less choice in choosing a suitable Internet Service Provider. One strategy used by them was to keep SIM Cards from multiple providers handy and change to the one that works best in a particular spot. They also try to log in late into the night if they feel that the internet is slow during the day.

65%
of respondents mentioned that slow and patchy internet was a major disincentive and caused them to stop trying to use the internet at all.

27%
of respondents mentioned downloading unreliable apps from the internet that promised to increase internet speeds.

30%
of respondents mentioned following a strict monthly recharge policy.

Slow Internet

At least 65% of the respondents mentioned that slow and patchy internet was a major disincentive and caused them to stop trying to use the internet at all. As per Alliance for Affordable Internet's, (A4AI) 'Meaningful Connectivity' framework access to adequate devices and connections is just one component that enables users to engage in the kinds of online activities that can deliver substantial benefits like online learning. Sufficient download speeds to access multimedia and other applications that make up a full internet experience is another core component. (Jorge & Dhanaraj, 2019).

At least 27% respondents mentioned downloading unreliable apps from the internet that promised to increase internet speeds. All of them mentioned that the apps did not have the effect it claimed.

Hustling for Data

Around 30% of the respondents mentioned following a strict monthly recharge policy. If the data were to run out before the end of the month, they would wait it out and recharge it only in the following month. During the fallow period, they tended to rely on their friend's creating Wi- Fi hotspots for them to use. Most mentioned that their friends happily oblige.

"Because tomorrow, my friend will be the one who needs the hotspot and I'll be the one with the data."

Several respondents also mentioned signing up for online surveys, apps etc., that promised free data on doing so. They also mentioned not giving thought to the risk implications of the act but admitted to feeling cheated when the promised schemes failed to come through.

All the respondents mentioned that whenever data ran out, public Wi-Fi was a great help. They mentioned connecting to it without giving thought to potential compromises in security or privacy. Their desire for connectivity would override such concerns. However, many respondents complained about the lack of consistency in the quality of public Wi-Fi.

The Need for Cyber Cafes

Many respondents mentioned that they frequented cyber cafes but mostly for getting printouts and if they have government/ institutional online forms regarding education or employment to fill.

They mentioned that the online forms are too cumbersome to be accessed on a mobile device and if the connection drops or they make an error, it would lead to further complications. Some also mentioned that it was reassuring to have the person managing the cybercafé around who would assist them in the filling of these forms. They were willing to pay extra for this service and spend anywhere between Rs. 30/- to Rs. 50/- for the same. Boys' groups also mentioned visiting cyber cafes that double as LAN gaming centers to play multiplayer PC games. Gamers mentioned spending anywhere between Rs. 50/- to Rs. 150/- for sessions.

Emotional Response to Lack of Access

Most of the respondents mentioned feeling listless, frustrated and even angry when they could not access the internet or the internet was extremely slow in scenarios where they really needed to which included pressing events like a deadline for an important form or something as banal as a long bus journey.

Access during Environmental Emergencies

Many of the cities visited had witnessed heavy unseasonal rainfalls which led to flooding in the cities especially in Bhubaneshwar, Mumbai and Thiruvananthapuram. Bhubaneshwar was particularly badly hit by a typhoon and families went without an internet connection for weeks. Some of the children and young people mentioned that they were too preoccupied in dealing with the aftermath, to worry about the internet. Once things began to normalize, they did feel that a good connection would have helped them stay on top of news and information. Considering such environmental emergencies are going to be a regular feature in our calendar, this is an important factor to consider.

Internet Shutdowns

"We felt angry and confused. There were so many rumors and we didn't know who to believe."

Earlier in 2019, the state of Tripura witnessed violent civil strife which led to the shutdown of internet services for around 96 hours. The respondents described a stressful and anxious 4 days in a chaotic atmosphere. The children mentioned that even in the absence of the internet, rumors were still floating around. Only they did not have means to verify what was true and what was not. All children mentioned a growing sense of 'anger and frustration' in their households.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

☞ Lack of 'Meaningful Access' to the internet puts children and young people at various kinds of risks:

- **Physical Risk:** In some cases children had to leave their homes and neighborhoods to walk to the nearest point of access (a public Wi-Fi connection, an area where internet network is available etc.) which could at times be over a kilometer away.

- **Mobile Device Security/Information Security Risks:** In some cases children came across and downloaded apps which fraudulently claim to increase internet speeds, provide free data etc., but which turned out to be malware, bloatware etc., that posed a threat to their devices and data.

- **Emotional Risks:** Children experienced listlessness, frustration and anger when internet speeds were slow or it was unavailable. A bad connection was de-motivating and they would tend to avoid and not take part in activities rather than attempt it on a bad connection.

- **Financial Risks:** Poor internet access led to families as well as children and young people paying more for additional SIM cards, access to cybercafés, etc. which resulted in a substantial cost incurred to lower socio-economic communities and families.

- **Disinformation Risks:** Internet shutdowns and blackouts during environmental or civic emergencies increased anxiety and fear among children and young people, depriving them of a medium through which they could verify information they receive.

☞ A large number of children and young people were **first generation users of the internet.** Instead of parents orienting them towards online spaces, in many instances, it was the children who learn first and then orient the family.

☞ There was a **stark gender, class & age (digital) divide** in mobile ownership, access to internet connection, quality of the connection & diversity of internet experiences. Girls, younger children, respondents belonging to marginalized families and communities faced significant barriers as opposed to boys, older children and respondents belonging to higher income, mainstream families and communities.

☞ A significant number of children and young people **used shared household devices.** Girls using shared devices with male siblings worry about surveillance by older brothers. The repercussions range from mild scolding to severe physical violence and temporary loss of access to their phones.

☞ Like most utilities, **quality of internet** connection in a particular neighborhood depended on the socio-economic status of the neighborhood and community.

☞ **A larger percentage of boys owned their mobile phones and for many of them it was purchased by their families.** If girls wanted personal mobile phones, chances were higher that they would have to buy it for themselves. Older respondents, those with jobs and those from financially secure households were more likely to have access to their own devices.


DATA REMAINING 1.82 GB
TIME REMAINING 00.48 MINS
"Whenever I have a busy day and am not able to use the internet then I feel sad that I wasted my daily quota of data by letting it go unused. I am not going to get it back."
2 GB
1 GB

USAGE

Understanding Screen times, Preferred Activities and Platforms

Screen time

Almost all children below the age of 15 mentioned that they had somewhere between 2 to 4 hours of internet enabled screen time every day. Most mentioned the time being rationed by an adult living in their household.

Older children, those who had access to personal devices and particularly boys above 18 years, were always connected to the internet even if they were not necessarily engaging with it actively. For them, it was the space and situation that they were in rather than any other form of control that dictated their usage of the internet.

For example, college hours and work hours resulted in more controlled & interrupted usage. Commutes resulted in a passive engagement with streaming of audio or visual content. And during free time, which on a weekday is right before bed for many, is when they claimed to be extremely active online and engaged with the internet until they decided to sleep or unknowingly fell asleep or ran out of their daily quota of data.

Finishing the Daily Quota

Respondents tended to view mobile data as a precious resource and unused data as a waste of the same. Many of the respondents who opted for unlimited mobile data packs mentioned that they felt the need to ensure that they finish the daily quota of data they can avail of before they went to bed each night. They wished that service providers would roll over unused mobile data so they could use it more strategically.

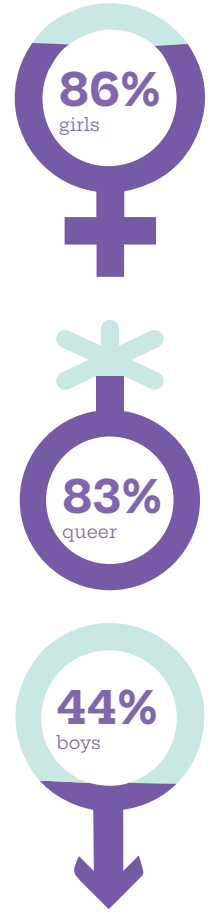
Intergenerational Conflict over Usage

varying levels of conflicts with parents and older siblings over their usage of the internet.

94% of respondents across genders reported varying levels of conflicts with parents and older siblings over their usage of the internet. However, the severity of the conflict was greater in terms of younger children as well as girls of all ages. They reported a greater degree of control by elders in the households as well as frequent verbal condemnation and, in some cases, also physical backlash.

"I don't use my phone when my father is around. I don't want to make him angry."

Many respondents perceived a confused and mixed reaction from parents regarding their internet screen time, such as – ***"There are times when I am sitting on my phone looking up something my teacher asked us to and I'll get a whack on my head from my father asking me to get back to studies. I am tired of explaining to my parents that I am doing my school work."*** The respondents speculated that their parents reacted in a confused manner as they were unfamiliar with the internet and many of them also had a negative perception of children's activities on the internet.



reported being concerned about policing of their online activities by family, extended family and partners and lovers, **16% girls** mentioned that spending time online had led to physical backlash against them.

Policing of Internet Usage

86% girls and 83% of the queer group members reported being concerned about policing of their online activities by family, extended family and partners and lovers, whereas among boys it was a concern for only 44% respondents. 16% girls mentioned that spending time online had led to physical backlash against them.

"I used to love making TikTok videos- mostly lip sync videos and dance videos. I was getting good at it and also popular. At the height of my popularity, I had 12.7K fans (followers). And one day, I came home and I got shouted at by my father and I was asked to delete my account. I didn't know what happened then. I later figured that it was my tuition sir who told my father that I shouldn't be wasting my time on TikTok and that everybody could see me there and comment on me. What was surprising was that earlier the tuition sir would like my videos.

After this incident there was a lot

of tension at home and I deleted the account. Now I only watch videos. My followers used to message me asking why don't I make videos anymore. I don't have an answer for them. I just tell them that I am facing some problems now. I still get messages asking me to make videos."

The above cited example is typical of the way the respondents spoke about policing, and of how the sprawling network of the great Indian family and relations wraps itself around the network of online spaces, dragging in orthodoxy and control into the digital age. And again, respondents across the country mentioned how they had to take down some online content which was deemed "not okay" by their family because someone in the extended family network complained about it. Over 80% of respondents (across genders) named the *"mama"* (uncle), a traditional patriarchal figurehead in most Indian cultures, as the main person behind the policing.

"I had posted a photo with a boy on Facebook. We were just friends. Then my uncle (mama) saw the photo and called my mother and told her that I had posted a photo with some boy. Then my mother beat me and yelled at me asking me who the boy was.

My mother was not ready to understand that it was only a friend. Since then, my Facebook has been shut. I no longer use Facebook. I started using Instagram then. And I have not added any members of the family."

Policing of content affects children and young people's usage and access. Respondents (largely younger children and girls and

80% respondents

(across genders) named the "mama" (uncle), a traditional patriarchal figurehead in most Indian cultures, as the main person behind the policing.

those who used shared devices) who were heavily monitored, restricted their activities to very few apps and websites.

Hence, it could be observed that the boy's groups, in particular older boys, who were comparatively less surveilled had more diverse

experiences across the internet. The policing is not limited to just online spaces but extends to on-ground spaces as well.

Surveillance of young girls and women is a long-standing practice in our society as elsewhere - and one that women from all castes, classes and religions are too familiar with, even if it affects them differently (Kovacs, 2017).

Close to 20% girls reported that they did not have permission to access the internet outside their homes.

"My brother hits me when I use my phone outside my home."

"If I use my phone on the road and my parents see me, they will murder me."

Sites of First Contact

"My first email ID was my first encounter with the internet. My father made it for me, I still use the same ID and I don't want to change it ever. That was my father and me connecting."

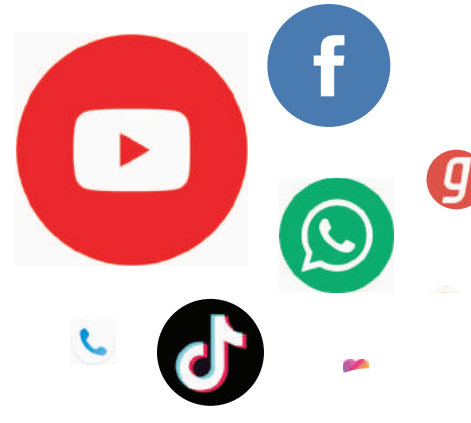
For 70% of the respondents their first contact with the internet was using Google for the purpose of learning. This was followed by social media sites/apps. If we only consider the queer group, 75% respondents mentioned first accessing online spaces through social media, particularly Facebook.

Mobile games, YouTube videos, mp3 downloads of Bollywood songs, pictures of popular film stars, email ids and WhatsApp video calls were other sites of first online contact mentioned.

Most Used Applications

Among the apps that they reported to be using currently, 'YouTube' featured most consistently with 88% respondents mentioning it. This was closely followed by Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Gaana and Truecaller. Other short form video applications like Bigo, Likee and

88% of the respondents used Youtube



Helo also found multiple mentions.

VidMate was the only app with a significant amount of mentions that was not available for download from either Play Store or App Store. Respondents who mentioned it were mostly older boys most of whom had sideloaded the app from their friend's phone.School going children also mentioned learning apps like Byju's and Vedantu.

Most Used Websites

"Google helped me a lot in understanding my sexuality and other sexualities and the community (LGBTQIA+). It is because of Google that I am comfortable about my sexuality and know so much about the community"

Google topped the list with respondents mentioning that they tend to ask a lot of 'how to' and 'learn to' queries from it. The search engine held a special relevance for the queer group, as it helped them find answers to long held queries about themselves, their identities and their desires.

A lot of respondents mentioned accessing government-run websites for jobs, information of schemes relevant to them and for exams results. Many also mentioned torrent websites from where they could download movies.

Everybody Games

All the boy's groups mentioned PUBG and Garena Free Fire as the most popular games while girls only in Mumbai and Delhi reported playing those games. Clash of Clans and FIFA was popular among boys but some games that enjoyed popularity among both sexes included Subway Surfer, Coin Master, Ludo and Candy Crush.

Those who played PUBG and Free Fire (largely boys) mentioned that they enjoyed the camaraderie and friendship facilitated by these multiplayer platforms. Those who played Candy Crush, Subway Surfer etc., (largely girls) mentioned doing so to pass time.

When asked, most respondents who mentioned playing PUBG were vaguely aware that there had been some moves at the government level to ban the game.

Most were under the impression that the game was being banned because of the offensive language gamers tend to use over voice chat. Both boy and girl gamers mentioned that they were

"Parents yell (at us) because we are continuously playing it (PUBG). They say "you will die there." The issue got amplified after there was a newspaper report of someone dying because of PUBG."

Q: **Do you believe the news is true?**

A: **"No. I cannot believe that a mobile game can kill a person but my parents don't understand."**

occasionally bothered by the in-game chat when the abuse turned toxic at which time, they were aware of options to mute the voices.

Everyone felt that a ban would be a bit of an overreach.

Preference for WhatsApp Calls

Most respondents were unconcerned with regular voice calling and preferred WhatsApp calls and other app-based Voice over IP calls. The fact that no talk time was deducted, the availability of video call functionality and comfort with the platform were mentioned as the main reasons for the preference.

Anhedonia

"What do I do when I get bored on being on the internet, I keep being on the internet"

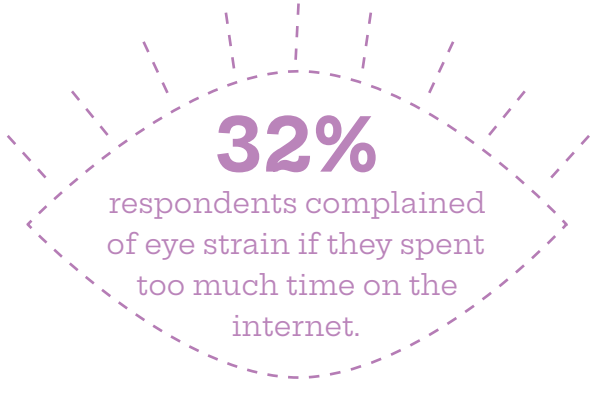
26% of all respondents believed that they were spending too much time on the internet while 15% believed that they were spending too little time. The majority (including some respondents who reported spending around 2 hours a day) reported that they were content with the time they spent online.

At least 30% of the respondents mentioned that after spending an hour or two on the internet they started feeling bored and felt compelled to log off. Another 30%

mentioned that despite being bored, they mindlessly scrolled through the online space or at least kept streaming music even if they were not actively listening to it. This is the very example that cultural theorist Mark Fisher cites while writing about 'depressive anhedonia'- 'a twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus' (Fisher, 2009). While the larger discourse around usage and screen time focuses more on addiction, it should be remarked that many more children are probably grappling with this state of anhedonia without even realizing it.

The Physical Pain of Excessive Use

A notable number of respondents mentioned experiencing actual physical pain with excessive screen time. There is evidence that higher levels of screen time is associated with a variety of health harms for children and young people, with evidence strongest for adiposity, unhealthy diet, depressive symptoms and quality of life (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). At least 32% respondents complained of eye strain if they spent too much time on the internet. However, a few also mentioned that their entire body started to ache which they attributed to their improper posture while using their phones.



Lack of Awareness of Platform Self-Regulation Features

Only a negligible number of respondents were aware that the apps they used came with time trackers and alarms.

Strategies for Self-Regulation

If there was a digital wellbeing app that was preloaded onto the phone, the respondents mentioned that they were more likely to use functions like alerts and alarms, usage trackers, productivity monitors and app locks that help them regulate their usage. Several respondents regularly monitored data around their usage patterns

made available through apps and used it to track their habits and manage usage.

Placing the phone to charge was a strategy employed by many of the respondents to disrupt their usage. Once the phone was placed on charge, respondents mentioned mindfully creating physical distance between them and the device to ensure that they were not tempted to log back on. They mentioned using the time to go out for a stroll or alternatively to take a nap.

Some others turned their focus onto other screens in the house like TV, some switched their devices to airplane mode, some focused on doing house work, some just uninstalled the addictive app. Most respondents claimed to have a strategy that worked for them once they self- identified problematic usage.

A memorable moment was when we saw a *15-year-old girl* sing into her phone and as if engaged in duet, her phone sang back to her.

Usage among Children and Young People who are Unlettered

Out-of-school children, i.e., those with interrupted schooling and/ or those who were unlettered, used voice commands to interact with their devices. Their usage was limited to a few apps (notably Google and YouTube) which they found easy to navigate using voice commands or apps that have limited options on the home screen (like TikTok).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Children below 15 years had between **2 to 4 hours of internet enabled screen time every day** which is rationed out by an adult living in their household. Older children, especially those above 18 years, were always connected to the internet even if they are not necessarily engaging with it actively.

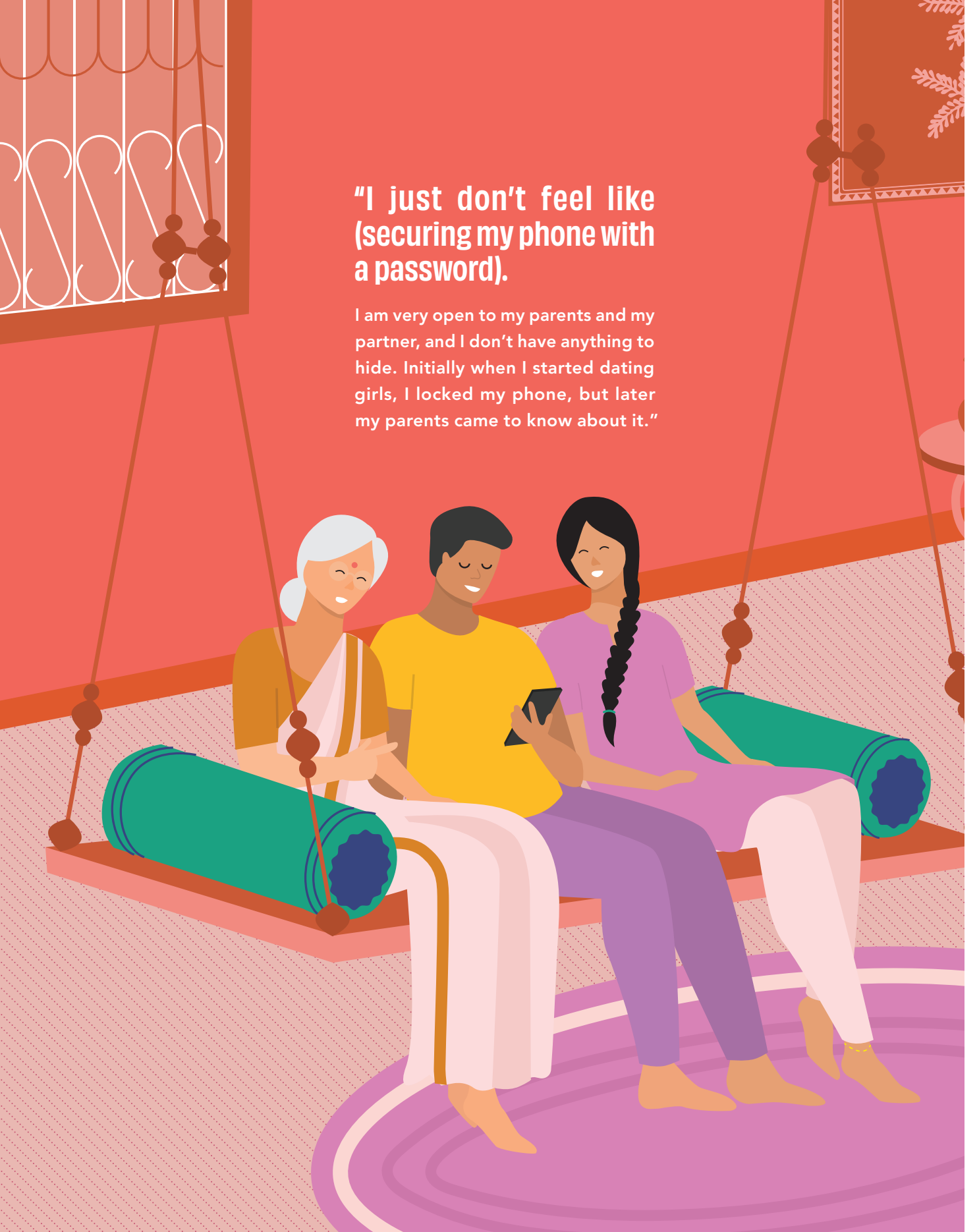
- Most respondents had **conflicts with parents and older siblings** over their usage of the internet. However, the severity of the conflict was greater among smaller children as well as girls of all ages.

- **Gender and sexual orientation** played a role in families' decision to police and surveil their children's online activities. **Girls and queer children were more concerned about families policing than boys.** Many girls did not have permission to access the internet outside their homes.

- **YouTube** was the most popular app, **Google** was the most popular website, **Facebook** was the most popular social media platform, **PUBG** was the most popular game, **Byju's** was the most popular EdTech app and **Vidmate** was the most popular app not available on Play store.

- A notable number of **respondents experienced actual physical pain in the body due to excessive screen time.** Those with uninterrupted internet connections and personal phones experienced signs of **'anhedonia'** (mindlessly engaging with the internet).

- Children and young people were more likely to **use digital wellbeing apps that come preloaded** with the phone rather than digital wellbeing functions provided within platforms.



“I just don’t feel like (securing my phone with a password).

I am very open to my parents and my partner, and I don’t have anything to hide. Initially when I started dating girls, I locked my phone, but later my parents came to know about it.”

PRIVACY & SECURITY

Perceptions of Privacy, Incidents regarding Privacy, Strategies employed to maintain Privacy

Q: Do you trust the people around the phone or even if they see it, it does not matter to you?

"It's both."

Q: How did you reach this point where it became so easy between you and your parents?

"I think it's the understanding. After I came out (told them about being queer), they have started respecting me and my privacy. And I also made it a point to share things with them. And that's also because I respect them as my parents. That was built up after 3 years."

Lock / Unlock

82% of children and young people who owned their devices actively screen locked their phone. At least 33% of those who chose to lock their phones, used a combination of screen locks (finger lock, passwords and face locks).

Of the remaining 18% who chose not to lock their devices, few had entry level phones which according to them did not merit password protection. Few believed that they had nothing to hide, few kept it open because other family members occasionally used their phones.

One respondent had an especially nuanced and singular answer that we have produced above where they did not lock their phone anymore on account of the evolution of a relationship based on mutual trust between their family and them. They remarked on 'trust' as a keystone in the larger relationship they shared with their family.

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33% of those who chose to lock their phones, used a combination of screen locks (finger lock, passwords and face locks).

18% who chose not to lock their devices

Family Culture and Technology

Existing cultures and norms within families influenced the manner in which technology was used. Children and young people who identified their families as strict and conservative reported stringent policing of online activities as opposed to those who identified their families as liberal or open minded. Some respondents belonging to 'strict families' mentioned that the phone was a device that seemed to extend and enable the family's control over their lives.

"When I'm with my phone at home, my family tells me that I'm wasting my time. If I'm outside and I miss their call, they immediately get angry and suspicious."

Shared Passwords

Despite screen locking their phones, over 54% respondents (across groups) claimed to have shared their passwords with close friends and family. Several reasons were offered including the fact that they exchanged passwords only with friends who had in turn shared their passwords with them. They narrated incidents like their friends frequently needing to use their phone or them being the only individual in their group of friends with access to a phone, where they decided it would be more practical to share the password. Some shared it out of goodwill and empathy. Others mentioned feeling a sense of compulsion. Some also shared their social media passwords with friends (especially those friends who did not have access to social media or were forbidden by their families to have accounts).

54%
respondents claimed to have shared their passwords with close friends and family.

However, the paradox here is that over 50% of the same respondents also mentioned that their friends posed the biggest threat to the integrity of their phone's security.

When this contradiction was pointed out, there were grins and mumbles and nobody had a clear answer.

"Friends get into your phone and they steal photos and contacts. But what can you do? You have to share."

There were also others who once used to share but have since stopped doing so. *"I was not worried about these things earlier but now I am. If I give my phone to my friend then there are some who will definitely check my WhatsApp. Now, I am the only one from my community who works in a place which is open and diverse. I am scared that if they take some contact numbers of girls and message someone at my workspace inappropriately, it will be bad for me and my image."*

It is interesting to note that as the respondent passes between two distinct cultural milieus, his password protection prevents one from bleeding into the other and ensures that he and the people he knows remain safe.

Q: What if you just tell your friends to not do something like that?

"I have told them, but if anything goes wrong, the situation will become very complicated and the responsibility will be on me. Better not to take the risk."

Coerced into Sharing Passwords

16% of the respondents (almost all girls, saving a couple of boys) mentioned being coerced to share passwords by fathers or boyfriends. A majority of them viewed it as an unwelcome intrusion into their private space.

"My boyfriend was asking me for my Facebook password. He usually has a lot of issues with me chatting with anyone on Facebook. He was adamant to get the password from me – troubled me for 2 full days, but I didn't relent. Then he stopped calling me and talking to me. He didn't call me for 5 full days.

Finally, I had to give him the password, he opened it and said, "Have you deleted all the messages and then shared the password with me?" The next day I changed my password. Now he doesn't know my new password."

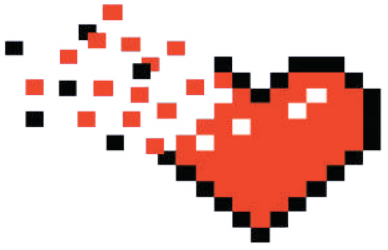
After the Break-Up

A few respondents from the girls and the queer group mentioned how sharing passwords with ex-partners resulted in non-consensual sharing of private content and online doxing after the break-up of the relationship. One respondent had faced an incident where an ex-boyfriend sent her a link to a spoof phishing site in order to gain her Facebook password. She was initially conned by it but was alerted of the fraud when the phishing site proved unresponsive beyond a certain point. (She was unable to log in and the site kept taking her to a different page) She managed to change and secure her password before the situation escalated.

Hidden Lives

"In the future the guy whom I would get married to should never find out that I ever had a Facebook account. Because he can say something or be weird about it. He can feel that something I did was a mistake even though I don't think it was one. Even my brothers don't know that I have a Facebook account."

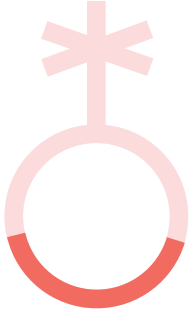
Only 27% of respondents mentioned that they were worried about someone finding out about



their previous and current online conduct in the future. If one considers only the girl's groups, less than 20% respondents mentioned being worried about the same. This was because they felt that they had acted preventively. They mentioned that there was nothing online that someone else could chance upon that could potentially result in any trouble or risk. For a majority of girls, the biggest worry they identified was that their father, extended family or future husband would find out that they had spoken with boys online. Many of the girls further explained that even if there was no romantic connotation to any of their interactions, they were afraid of being caught in the simple act of talking to a boy. They mentioned struggling to negotiate the fluidity and freedom offered by the internet with their lived realities.

They felt that the freedom that they exercised on the internet could put them in the line of serious risk.

For a majority of girls, the biggest worry they identified was that their father, extended family or future husband would find out that they had *spoken with boys online.* Many of the girls further explained that even if there was no romantic connotation to any of their interactions, they were afraid of being caught in the simple act of talking to a boy. They mentioned struggling to negotiate the fluidity and freedom offered by the internet with their lived realities.



41%

of the queer group mentioned that they were worried about their online lives being made public.

Some of them had witnessed their friends go through the violence and stigma of having their online life become known to the family and immediate society. They felt that their fears were well founded and placed.

If we consider only the queer group, 41% mentioned that they were worried about their online lives being made public.

"There are many times when I upload things about the queer community and I am scared because people are not yet aware about the community. They could tease us. I have been through that and then there are issues in the family as well. I would not like it if someone checks me deeply. It's not just about community, it is also about my intimacy."

Most respondents in the queer group had already been through an experience where their online personas had spilled over and onto their offline lives. At least 2 respondents have had past experiences of inadvertently exposing their website history to close family and friends who were not aware of their sexual orientation. One of the incidents ended well for the respondent with acceptance while the other slid into a passive-aggressive silent mess that has continued to play on the respondent's mind.

The Posts of Others

72% of the respondents mentioned that they were more worried about what others (including their friends) posted about them online, often, without their consent.

72%

of the respondents mentioned that they were more worried about what others including their friends posted about them online, often, without their consent.

"I had put up a display picture of me in a saree. A close friend took a screenshot of the display picture and shared it as a status message on his WhatsApp account to wish me for my birthday. Later I get a screenshot from my friend on a group chat window. In it I could see that another friend of his had shared my picture from my friend's status and a group of people were commenting on it. I flew into a rage, called up my friend, spoke to the other guy, threatened to call up the police and then made him apologize to me. All this happened just because I put up a display picture."

Many others mentioned how the lies they told at home were caught because of their friend's social media posts. For e.g. they would be expected to be in college but the post on social media indicates that it was taken at another location, there would be a bottle of alcohol or a stick of cigarette visible in the picture etc.

Political Identities

Respondents highlighted that the assertion of political identities and strong opinions on politically sensitive issues on the internet seemed to invite backlash online in the form of trolling and cyberbullying from known users and strangers across the internet as well as offline admonishments from family and teachers.

Children & young people expressed worry about the implications of their vocal political views. What if they applied for a job at a place where the boss held opposing views? They were unsure about the effect their overt political views on social media would have on their career.

For another respondent, such concerns were beside the point- ***"I would like my future employer to look me up on the internet and I would actually want them to learn about me. I am very rebellious with my ideas and if you don't accept me, and what is right according to me, I would not be able to work***

with you. If you are not ok with my ideas, I think, I would not want to work with you."

The Value of Privacy

"We hide it from them because we don't want to show it to them. It doesn't feel safe."

The respondents seemed to place a higher trust and value on apps where anonymity and privacy were more secure. Respondents who had both Instagram and Facebook accounts, unanimously rated Instagram as the app on which they felt safer. The ability to hide real names, an effective private account function, ease of blocking unwanted content and contacts, the ability to share securely, and the option to create finsta accounts (fake or alternate Instagram accounts) were revealed as the major factors that played into their vote of confidence.

Platform Privacy Functions

All the respondents had an idea of basic privacy functions related to contacts and content if it was available within the platform.

Over 80% respondents knew how to block accounts across social media apps. 53% had actively blocked members of their family including distant relatives. 36% refused to add family members to their friend lists. The primary reason given was to avoid policing of their content.

There were still some confusions around executing functions which gave them control over personal data, targeted online advertising based on user activity (which many respondents qualified as 'creepy' and 'scary'), anonymity, limiting

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53%
had actively blocked members of their family including distant relatives.

36%
refused to add family members to their friend lists.

the ability of others to search for their profiles on social media and moderation of content displayed on their personal timeline.

Concerns about Losing Agency over Personal Data

"What does Facebook do with our data? Do Facebook, Google and Amazon collaborate to make sure the advertisement for the dress I searched for follows me around the internet?"

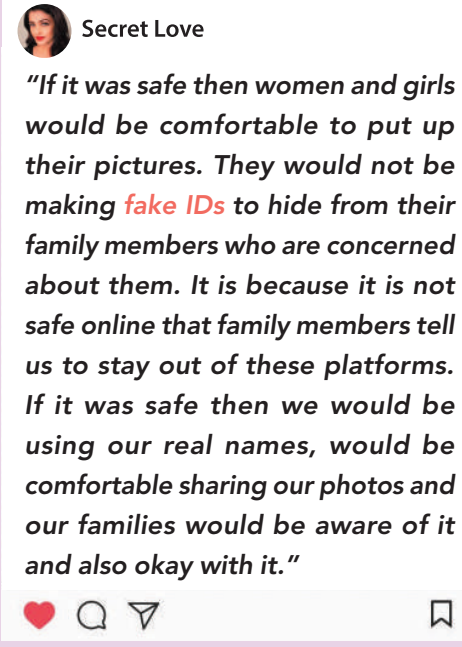
Mostly young people, who were above 18 years and who had near continuous internet connectivity articulated concerns over how the data was being taken from them and being used. Many of them also had suspicions based on personal experience in which they claimed that their phone's speaker was listening in on them. They mentioned that they did not particularly enjoy their preferences being reflected back to them without their explicit consent. A few respondents mentioned how this particular trait caused them to look for alternatives to Google search. They all had questions as to what they could do to limit such tracking.

Strong Passwords

There was satisfactory awareness across groups about what a strong password would entail in terms of length of the passwords and the various character types to use. Many respondents reported remembering their password by writing it down on a piece of paper. Less than 7% respondents knew about two-factor authentication on any platform. Even fewer knew about password managers.

Still Unsafe

However, despite all privacy settings and block mechanisms, no respondent reported feeling absolutely safe on an online social media platform.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Some children and young people shared their passwords with **close friends and family** even as they viewed their friends as the biggest threat to the integrity of their phone's security.

- Girls were more likely to be coerced into sharing passwords by their fathers or boyfriends. In several cases, sharing passwords with ex-partners resulted in **non-consensual sharing** of private content and online doxing after the relationship became sour.

- Children and young people who identified as queer and girls were likely to be more concerned about the privacy of their internet activities than others. They were circumspect about their activities online and to avoid negative reactions, many of them tended to pre-censor the content they put on social media. Majority respondents were more worried about what others including friends post about them online rather than their own online conduct and internet timelines.

- Existing culture within the family influences the manner in which technology is used. Children from conservative and strict families were likely to be **surveilled and controlled** as opposed to more liberal families. Children and young people actively block members of their family including distant relatives from their timeline. Many also refuse to add family members to their friend lists.

- Child and young people were cautious about **asserting political identities** and strong opinions as it led to online and on-ground backlash.

- Children and young people placed a higher value and trust on apps where **anonymity and privacy** were more secure.

‘I share my deepest feelings with the world through status messages, songs, videos and emojis.’

BEHAVIOUR

Understanding patterns of online behavior, understanding deviations from on-ground behavior

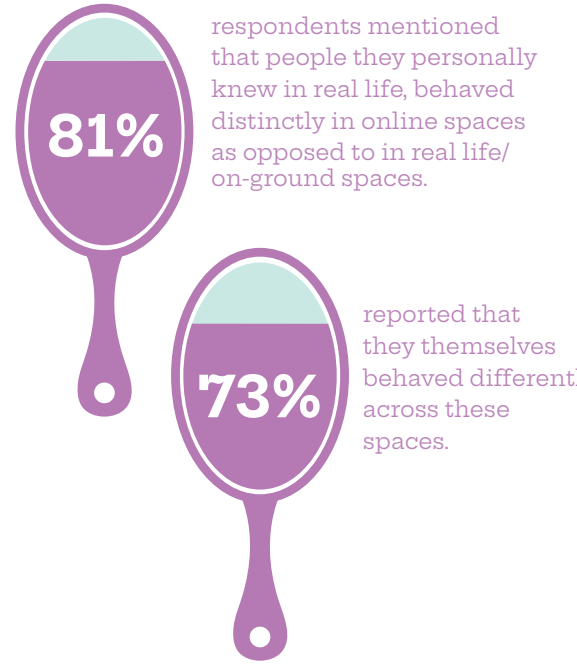
Online / Offline

81% of all the respondents mentioned that people they personally knew in real life, behaved distinctly in online spaces as opposed to in real life/ on-ground spaces. 73% reported that they themselves behaved differently across these spaces. While the divergence was clearly acknowledged, most respondents mentioned that it manifested and played out in different ways.

"Many of us are more vocal online than in real life. Then there are also a few who speak less online and more in real life."

"Some people don't even look the way they look (in real life). They change their look when they get online."

"I know someone who was very harsh and abusive online but I visited them at their home once and they were extremely calm and decent in real life." **The responses hinted at Online Disinhibition Effects (ODE) that takes place in interactions on the Internet, leading to the loosening of social restrictions and inhibitions that are normally present in face-to-face interactions.**

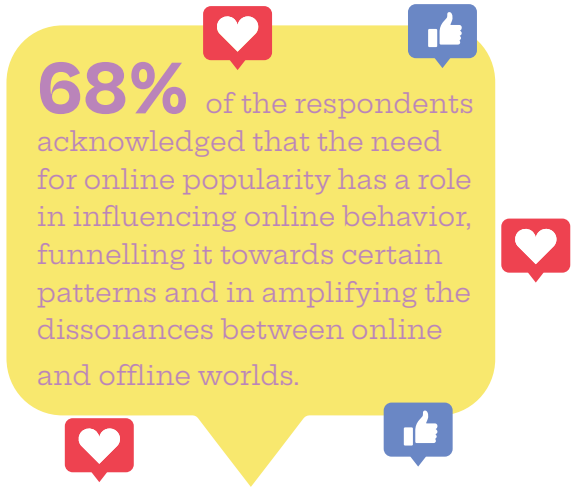


While some were experiencing it positively, some confessed to experiencing it in its toxic form leading to strong language and abuse online (Suler, 2004).

More like Myself

"I am louder, more assertive and more like myself on the internet."

For the queer groups, many of the responses indicated that they were closer to their 'real selves' in online spaces as opposed to on-ground. The apparent privacy, anonymity and agency provided to them by online spaces have enabled



them to explore, understand, and come to terms with their identities. They found that they could curate their online identities in a way that managed to better express themselves.

The Need for Attention

"Once you get a little bit of popularity, you start showing off. If you get a lot of likes when you post a picture of your bike, before you know it you turn into a biker on Facebook."

At least 68% of the respondents acknowledged that the need for online popularity has a role in influencing online behavior, funneling it towards certain patterns and in amplifying the dissonances between online and offline worlds.The 'need for attention' affected them in a comprehensive manner, in the way they consumed as well as created, thereby affecting the very basis of their online and also offline behavior.

Adults often dismiss the significance of popularity dynamics because, looking back, it seems unimportant. Yet, it is how we all learnt the rules of social life, status, respect, gossip and trust. Status games teach us this (Boyd, 2006). Rob Horning builds on this thought, writing that "when the ranking criteria is embedded in technology and imbued into digital networks, it becomes harder to escape." He goes on to explain that young people are prone to respond to 'the metrics that are hard-coded into the technology that structures their social life' (Horning, 2015).

Counter Disinhibition

A small number of respondents, all of them over 18 years and with near continuous access to the internet, mentioned that once they were confronted with the severe dissonance between online and offline spaces, they began to notice how they themselves had started playing into it. This resulted in a form of restraint and self-control, which can be read as their active critique of the attention metrics – a form of critical counter disinhibition. Or it may just be a burnout.

"I feel like I have seen it through. And I don't want to play a role just to fit in online. I have friends around me and we are happy together."

"Once I started noticing how much I cared about the way I presented myself online, the routine began to feel tiresome and I began to feel ridiculous."

These respondents, who claimed to have once been enthusiastic users of social media, displayed a certain self-awareness seemingly brought about by a desensitization to disinhibition factors. They mentioned finding themselves too aware or alienated to participate wholeheartedly in the activities their friends indulged in.

Selfies Over Photographs

"When we post our pictures on WhatsApp we put on makeup, wear a nice skirt. We don't post pictures when we are dressed regularly or when we are dressed as we would be dressed at home. We get ready for the pictures and then post them."

When asked what they liked to share on the internet, a clear majority mentioned photographs of themselves and particularly photographs of themselves in the context of personal achievements like, if they won an award or received good grades. Another favorite was posting pictures of themselves in beautiful and 'strange' touristy and non-touristy places.

"I don't want to post just the pictures of the place. That is easily available on Google. I want to post pictures of the place with me in it. It also goes on and will return to your timeline as a 'memory'."

In a world suffused with photographs, the majority of the respondents perceived the "selfie" as what separates their photo from stock imagery, makes it personal and gives it an identity. They also mentioned enjoying the anticipation that in due course the photograph would return to their timelines as a "memories" – a word that they used to signify not just the retention and recall of information in the brain but also 'On this Day, XXX Years Ago' social media posts that recap and revisit their social media timeline

Showcasing Talent and Skills

The respondents liked to showcase their own skills be it cooking, photography, stitching, poetry, videos, drawing, food vlogs, critical reviews of films they watched, and workout routines among others.

Some respondents mentioned being actively involved in creating shareable content, in particular processing and editing popular songs into WhatsApp status messages. Many respondents had dedicated social media accounts on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube for showcasing their talent and skill.

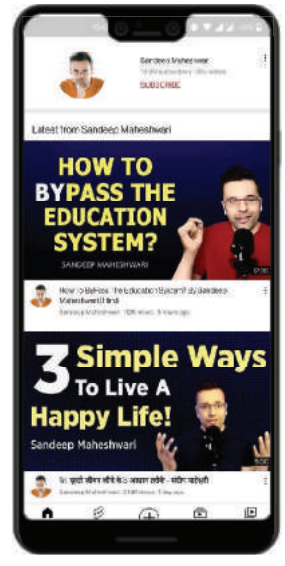
The Online Effect

A few respondents reported that they were able to segregate their online and offline lives but for those who were constantly online, the two spaces were a continuum and what happened in one space had a direct and pronounced effect on their disposition and activities in the other space.

Self Help and Self Care

Self-help seemed to be an extremely popular genre of video content among children and young people and featured in responses across all groups. Around 60% of the respondents namechecked a self-help guru by the name of Sandeep Maheshwari.

"He speaks about things that speak to me. He is reassuring and motivating. He makes me stop worrying and feel that I can do something to make my life better."



60% of the respondents namechecked a self-help guru by the name of Sandeep Maheshwari.

56% respondents mentioned that watching motivational content made them feel better about their lives in the offline world. Even as the self-care discourse begins to take root among civil society, it was interesting to note that children and young people are organically turning to similar and adjacent content under the 'self-help' category.

Many respondents spoke of content featuring comedy and humor in the framework of 'wellness' where it helped them relax and cut away from the pressure and stresses of the day and even assisted them into drifting off to sleep with a cheerful and peaceful frame of mind.

Assertion and Motivation

The queer group highlighted assertive, activist content around LGBTQIA+ rights as something that motivated them.

Anxiety & Stress

If comedy, activism, motivational videos and songs had desirable effects it was mentioned that violent, misogynistic and communal content created anxiety and stress among the respondents.

Disturbed by Strife

78% respondents categorized videos pitting Hindus against Muslims as extremely disturbing. They also mentioned videos against caste-based-reservation as something that also induces anxiety and fear among them. The children belonging to marginalized and minority communities spoke of this issue with deeper concern. They described the cascading negative effect that such content had on their lives.

"Some of these videos are clearly fake but whenever I see them, I know that when I return to my community, I will see people looking at this video and getting incensed by the content.

They won't question the content. They will not realize that it is fake. Even if you try to tell them they won't listen to you and the whole atmosphere in and around my house gets uncomfortable.

This happens every time there is caste or religion related strife in the city."

Every time there is a discourse on inappropriate content for children there is talk of porn, violence and misogyny in video games and some talk about hate speech, but mostly within the ambit of cyberbullying. Rarely does the child protection discourse give due focus to the huge amounts of hateful content around religion and caste. However, children and young people are clearly and, in a majority, identifying it as an issue.

Such content identified as 'disturbing' by children and young people finds acceptance and echo in the mainstream media of the country (Suresh, 2020). It also features considerably in the meme and content sharing ecosystem in the country where children and young people are creating and consuming this hateful genre of content.

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respondents categorized videos pitting Hindus against Muslim as extremely disturbing.

Hate speech can directly hurt children who are part of the target groups. It also enables indoctrination and recruitment of youth into harmful alliances. It can also incite children and young people to commit hate crimes (Tynes, 2008).

Bad Taste Jokes on Gender

"I have left groups and blocked people because in every joke they shared, there was something demeaning about women. Women are portrayed as horrible - annoying or stupid or loud. If you reply mentioning that you have a problem with it, they accuse you of being unable to take a joke. You can't win. One joke can be funny but if it's continuous, it drives you crazy."

Girls' groups unanimously mentioned discomfort at being part of mixed-gender WhatsApp groups where jokes in bad taste about women would be shared, mostly by boys. Several girls mentioned that they were not bothered by it but a few mentioned being persistently angered and made uncomfortable by such content.

Some respondents added that such content, even though in extremely poor taste, could not be reported for take down as it was considered as not being sufficiently egregious.

The cumulative effect of being subject to such content was memorably described by a respondent as being similar to 'gaslighting'- a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group, making them question their own memory, perception, or judgment (Wikipedia, 2020).

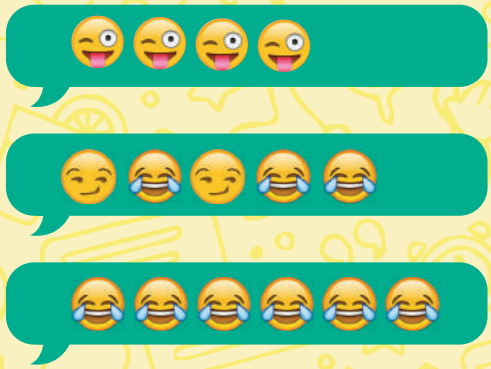
"What can you report it for? Bad taste is not a category. You end up feeling like you are being gaslit."

News About Suicides

Many in the queer group mentioned experiencing mental health distress when they hear news about queer children and youth from across the world dying by suicide. Couple of respondents mentioned that it caused them to spiral into depression.

"I wonder what they were going through and sometimes I feel I can imagine what they felt like."

At such moments reaching out to others in the community, close friends, allies and even counsellors helped the respondents.



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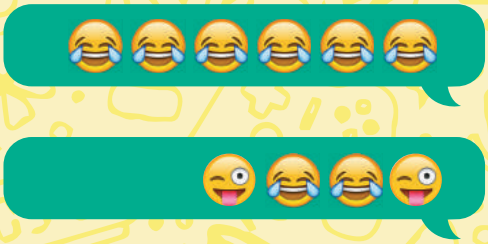
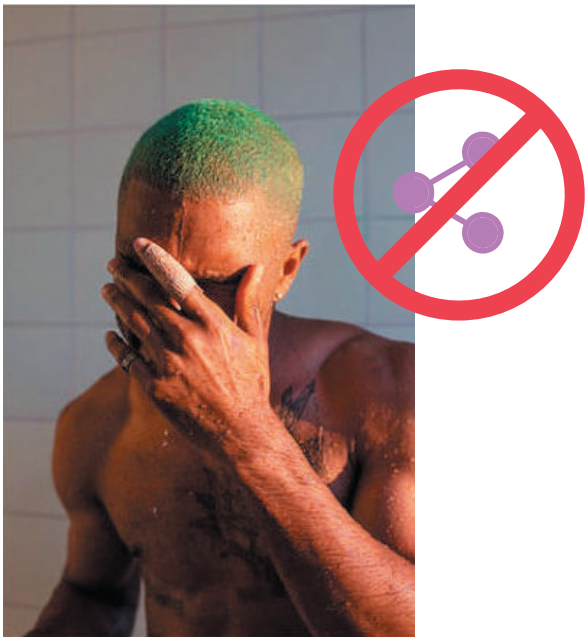




Don't Share

Most respondents mentioned that they would never share content that made them feel sad, afraid, or anxious. Among the other things they did not like to share online, were personal photographs and videos especially those with their lovers and partners. They also mentioned being averse to sharing content that would highlight what they perceived as their own shortcomings.

Image over Text

The overall preference was not to share in the medium of text. The respondents overwhelmingly overruled text as a medium of preference. Minimum text was permissible and anything else would be more preferable – photos, videos, boomerangs.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Children and young people behaved differently across the online and offline spaces. They **experience Online Disinhibition Effect in both positive and toxic forms.** The need for online popularity plays a key role in shaping their online behavior.

- Many **queer children** and young people **felt closer to their real selves in their online identities** as opposed to on-ground spaces.

- **Self-help** is an extremely popular genre of video content among children and young people. **Watching motivational content** on the internet makes them feel better about their lives in the offline world.

- Children and young people categorize videos pitting Hindus against Muslim as well as videos against **caste-based reservations as extremely disturbing.**

- Queer children and young people experience **mental health distress** when they hear **news about queer children and youth from across the world dying by suicide.**

- Girl respondents report high levels of exasperation with bad faith and bad taste jokes on gender shared on social media which demean and stereotype women. **The experience of being subject to such content in the absence of a reporting mechanism was compared to 'gaslighting'.**

"I try to find shorter, simpler and more direct versions of answers to my questions on the Internet."

INFORMATION

The kind of information sought online, perceptions regarding availability of information and quality of available information

*Questions about Bodies, Sex and Sexuality

Around 3/4th of the responses collected were under the category of body, sex and sexuality. (This could be a result of the way the question was framed and the manner in which the responses were collected).

These queries were framed across several contexts: biological *(how does a zygote look?)*, developmental *(what is the average size of a human penis?)*, social *(is it wrong to fall in love with someone of your choice?)*, political *(why is homosexuality illegal in India?)*, medical *(why do I have a lump in my breast?)*, practical *(how to have sex?)*, self-help *(how can I impress a girl?)*, self-care *(how do I prevent stretch marks from forming on my body?)*. It was a dizzying array of questions ranging from the simple to the complex to the downright outré.

There was curiosity not just about their bodies but also the bodies of others. *(What does a hijra's private parts look like?)*

This was not surprising given public discussion of topics of a sexual nature are widely considered as taboo in the Indian society, therefore acting as a barrier to delivery of adequate and effective sexual education. Sex education at school level has attracted strong objections and apprehension from all areas of the society, including parents, teachers, and politicians, with its provision banned in several states (Ismail, Shahjahan, Rao & Wiley, 2015).

*(In order to elicit responses about the Google searches made by respondents, with an emphasis to elicit even those that they considered private, the respondents were given chits on which they were asked to write down the queries. These were later collected anonymously in a box.)

Too Many Answers

When asked if they had managed to find satisfactory answers to the queries they had written, many of respondents mentioned that they continued to remain confused. If there was silence on-ground, there was a surfeit of voices online. Children and young people reported being unable to arrive on an authoritative answer that satisfied them. In fact, the deeper they searched, more contradictions emerged. Many respondents replied that during their search they soon would reach a point where they were unable to distinguish between sources and information that were believable and those which were not. They frequently fell prey to clickbait. They felt that some websites that appeared believable were too alienating to access as the language they used was too technical and complicated to easily comprehend. However, this did not discourage them from continuing to trawl the internet for queries around body, sex and sexuality.

"Some websites say they have information, but when you open, they don't."

"In some videos, the explanation is theoretical. What I was looking for was something more practical."

"We get a lot of information. Not always right information. Just a lot of information."

"Some of the terminologies that I read on the internet were too complicated for me, like I did not understand what the term 'shukranu' (sperm) meant. I had to physically go and ask one of my relatives, even then I did not have full clarity."

It is interesting to note that despite receiving information related to menstruation in schools, girls continued to actively search for information around it online.

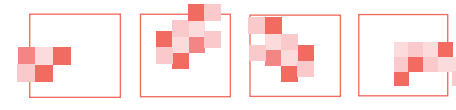
NSFW (Not Suitable for Work)

"Searching for this information will sometimes lead you to NSFW sites."

The above opinion was frequently cited in all groups but unanimously echoed by the queer group.

Lesbian India

"If you search 'lesbian India' you land up on a porn site on the very first page. It is really annoying when you are looking for information that may define you for the rest of your life, but you keep finding porn."



When asked why they did not consider turning on the safe search mode while browsing, most replied that they did not think of it as an option. Furthermore, they mentioned that they were looking for adult content. Not pornographic content. In that light, they were unsure as to what content the safe search function would restrict.

The Exact Term

The queer group reported a common early struggle with online searches where they were unaware of search terms and keywords to find content related to their sexual orientations and preferences.

"While growing up I did not have the exact terms. Framing the question was a challenge. I tackled it by typing in whatever I knew and throwing together as many relevant words as I knew. Like some of my earlier searches were simple, like - 'man loving man'. This was before I knew the term 'gay'."

Career Questions

Of the remaining 1/4th of the queries collected from the respondents, queries about careers featured highly especially if the child had aspirations for civil service.

As opposed to questions regarding bodies, sex and sexuality, respondents rated the answers received in response to queries regarding career and the internet as more satisfactory.

"How can I become IAS officer?"

"How to write a resume?"

"How should my body language be at an interview?"

Many respondents also mentioned querying the internet, to learn how to use internet platforms.

"How to delete your profile on Instagram?"

"How to make videos on TikTok?"

"How to use Dream11?"

We met a 13-year-old girl living in a lower socio-economic pocket in Mumbai and another girl in a middle-class area of Agartala both of whom could read and write basic Korean. They were both driven by their fandom for Korean boy bands and K-dramas. They had worked towards and picked up genuine language skills along the way. They used a mix of language apps, videos, social media and interactions on social media with the larger community of fans to learn the language. We met a boy in Tripura who was learning Punjabi via YouTube videos so he could better understand the songs that he loved.

Aspiring guitarists, singers, dancers and cooks were many but there was also one child interested in quantum physics and was part of a community that shared this interest online. Another child who lived in a community with frequent electricity cuts, learnt how to make an emergency lamp on YouTube that they now used in their home. We also came across an 'alien hunter' who participated in an online community dedicated

Ecosystems of Learning

Several children and young people were willing to pick up and learn skills just so they could participate more intensely in their interests. The respondents cited soft culture such as music, art etc. as well as the global and national online communities & subcultures as one of the key factors driving them into self-learning.

to finding life outside of planet Earth.

Several respondents indicated that they picked up video and image editing skills from online learning videos. Almost all respondents unanimously mentioned 'YouTube' as the learning platform of choice.

It is important to note that children can be motivated to self-learn off the internet.

However self-learning was not their primary motive but rather they view themselves as part of a larger and dynamic ecosystem within which they have presence and agency. Also, in most cases, a high level of general access seemed to enable children to enter these self-learning ecosystems. This is echoed by the findings in Global Kids Online Comparative Report, which states that children who receive less restrictive mediation from their parents are more likely to indulge in diverse activities online – not only entertainment activities, but also informational and creative activities

(Livingstone, Winther, & Saeed, 2019).

Blocked Websites

While scrolling the internet, some of the respondents mentioned coming across blocked websites.

"We knew they were blocked, because we got a message on our screens."

Most respondents were unaware that there were ways to circumvent the block. They mentioned that they would leave the site but somewhere further down the search results they were able to access a similar website to the one that they were looking for. Many others were aware of VPNs and proxies which they found either from their friends or with the help of Google. Only one respondent had a paid VPN subscription and a few mentioned being familiar with the Tor browser. A few respondents mentioned that the internet service provider Reliance Jio blocked websites without issuing a message (splash page) which confused them as to whether the website was down or blocked.

On Censorship

When the respondents were asked about censorship on the internet, they seemed confused and had no singular answers. It was a contested space. Whether porn or political content, questions around censorship almost always snowballed into a debate amongst the participants in the groups. At the time when the questionnaire was being administered, India's most popular TikTok star Faisu (Faisal Shaikh) had his account suspended on account of posting some politically sensitive content. This featured heavily in the debates.

One of the most interesting debates that ensued, occurred in a girls' group and has been presented here. The respondents bring out with great clarity the range of issues and considerations that inform online censorship in the country.

"What happened to Faisu was not right. Faisu had spoken up against an incident where a Muslim boy was beaten by a Hindu mob. That is the only reason he was banned. If I am killed in a similar act then my friends and well-wishers will obviously be angered by it."

"Faisu was banned because the manner in which he said what he said would have instigated further violence in the society and among Hindus and Muslims. Whatever happened to the man who was killed was wrong and everyone supported him but what Faisu said instigated other people."

"Faisu was just putting his point across. He was not saying anything that the news was not saying. Then they should also be banned. Why was only he banned?"

"He was only lip-syncing. They did not shut down the account of the guy who had given the audio."

"He was shut down because he was popular and could instigate a huge audience."

"He was shut down because Faisu's entire team was Muslim and they were criticizing Hindus."

"I think Faisu was blocked because the video being out there made him vulnerable to threats and violence."

"Should we not talk about such things just because there can be a threat to our lives?

"....."

Disinformation

"No one believes everything on the internet is true but it is still difficult to draw a line between real and fake."

100%

of the respondents were aware of fake news and disinformation even if they did not know the exact terms to assign to it.

100%

of the respondents reported being affected adversely by it.

Some were affected more seriously than the others.

"One day there was a communal skirmish in my community. The Hindu and Muslim neighbors were turning on each other based on some news involving the desecration of a holy place. The news came on WhatsApp and it also came on a local news channel. It was only later after the fights had been controlled by the police and people were arrested that we came to know that the entire incidence was false."

"There was almost a stampede in my neighborhood because there was a WhatsApp message which said that stocks of salt were going to run out. The neighborhood stores also started selling salts at a higher price."

"There was a WhatsApp message circulating in my community that if you get above a certain % of marks in your exam, you were entitled to some money by the government. My father had to visit the local municipal office to find out that this was not true."

"There were two separate rumors of strange happenings in my neighborhood that were circulated on TikTok and the whole community became paranoid. First was the ***"chutiya katne wallah" (a mysterious, possibly paranormal entity that chopped braids) and "the sibattewalli" (a mysterious, possibly paranormal entity that beat you to death with a piston)****. We were so scared that we didn't step out at night especially the girls as they were supposed to be the targets."*

Disinformation in the time of Crisis

Respondents mentioned that even though they had become more careful about trusting online information, they had occasionally experienced a slip. One reason for this that they identified was that disinformation tended to spike every time there were larger crises or conflicts like the demonetization, extreme weather events, during election time etc.

"We are already a bit confused and then, we are ready to believe that something drastic is true," said a respondent referring to the 'salt is running out' rumor that occurred in the shadow of demonetization, spread through WhatsApp forwards and lead to communities rushing to neighborhood shops trying to stock up on salt. The impact of this bit of disinformation was located in lower-income communities across the country. Respondents from middle- and higher-income communities were unfamiliar with this incident."

Verifying Information

"If I find out that a particular piece of content which is circulating is false, I make it a point to reach out to others and inform them. It is not easy to check. There are many who cannot do it and many others who will not do it."

Most respondents mentioned that they read the comments below videos and articles to check if any user has contested the content. Others watched multiple videos on the same issue to verify the content. Some checked it against mainstream new channels on TV. Some respondents qualified the statement by mentioning that they frequently found that TV news channels relayed fake news and misinformation as facts. Some other respondents mentioned using Google search to verify information. A few respondents mentioned preferring the crowdsourced question and answers platform Quora, as they found the first-person, experience-based nature of the answers more believable. Most respondents mentioned that they frequently assist family members & friends in verifying information.

33% of the respondents (largely boys) reported earning money off the internet.

Earning off the Internet

33% of the respondents (largely boys) reported earning money off the internet. Majority mentioned fantasy cricket apps like Dream11 and MPL as the sites where they earned money. They also participated in various survey apps like Google Opinion Rewards, Clixsense, Neobux and Global Test Survey where they exchanged data for money. None of them earned more than Rs. 1000/- through any of these platforms. They also reported participating in online surveys and downloading apps in exchange for mobile recharge coupons.

Most of the respondents mentioned that as long as they did not have to invest any money, they were unaware of any harm that could occur through these apps and surveys.

A couple of respondents vaguely mentioned that they knew that these apps took a lot of their data and sold it. They added that they were willing to make the exchange for money and recharge. Some of the older boys mentioned that making money in this manner was a phase in their lives but these days they did not pay attention to such schemes.

The girls who reported earning money online, did so by selling their paintings and handicrafts over Instagram or Facebook. Few of them also found a job which involved transcribing online videos.

The money earned by the respondents online was mostly deposited either into their Paytm accounts or their parent's Paytm accounts.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Almost all children and young people searched for information related to body, sex and sexuality online. Despite coming across a surfeit of content in response to the questions, they struggled to get satisfactory answers online because they are **unable to identify suitable and trusted sources.** Queer children had an early struggle searching for relevant information especially if they are unaware of the specific terminologies used by the community.

- Most children and young people had come across pornography when they were searching for content related to body, sex and sexuality. These instances were higher for queer children who **can stumble across pornographic material** even when they use even basic search terms like 'lesbian'.

- **Children and young people were motivated to self-learn on the internet.** They were motivated to self-learn when they saw themselves as part of a larger and dynamic ecosystem/community within which they have presence and agency. Meaningful access as well as increased diversity in internet usage played a part in motivating self-learning.

- Children and young people were **confused about internet censorship** and the manner in which it was applied by governments as well as platforms.

- Children and young people were **not just aware of fake news and disinformation, they were also affected adversely by it.**

- **Boys tended to earn money using online gambling apps and survey apps while girls earn through showcasing** and selling self – made artifacts on social media.

IT

DOESN'T

MATTER

IF THERE ARE

MORE SPACES

WE NEED

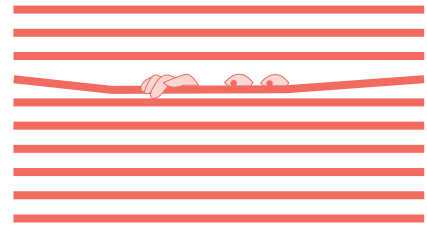
RISKS

Understanding Risk perception as well as strategies to overcome risk

Sharing Pictures and Videos Online

90% respondents across all groups mentioned that sharing pictures and videos of themselves on the internet as the activity that entailed a high level of risk. The respondents mentioned that despite all possible safeguards there seemed to be no way of guaranteeing that such content would be seen only by those they intended to share it with. They were worried about them losing control of their accounts, the photographs being leaked as well as being misused. They mentioned that familial and social repercussions to such events compounded their fears of losing control of their content.

Girls' groups and the queer group expressed deeper concern regarding this risk as opposed to the boy's groups. While exchanging nude photographs/selfies was mentioned as extremely risky by all groups, girls also included photos in which bare body parts like legs and waist were visible as well as photographs in which one was seen standing with a boy who was not a family member.



Stranger Danger

88% respondents classified meeting strangers online as one of the potential risks they face on the internet. The fact that they did not know the person in real life as well as the fact that there was little scope to check the veracity of the person's profile and claims, made encounters with strangers rife with risk. 36% of respondents (majority of whom were girls) mentioned that they never interact with unknown people online. The rest reported having online acquaintances and friends whom they did not know in real life.

88% respondents classified meeting strangers online as one of the potential risks they face on the internet.

36% of respondents (majority of whom were girls) mentioned that they never interact with unknown people online.

When engaging with strangers online, most kept the conversation limited and if the person seemed to behave in a manner that felt dissonant or strange, most respondents mentioned immediately opting to block that person.

Other respondents (mostly boys) said that they opted for gradual measures like moving from online platforms to phone calls to video calls to exchanging details. Personal information like phone numbers, other social media accounts, email ID, and location among others were also revealed in a gradual manner as an element of trust was progressively built up through communication and exchange of details.

Most respondents who met online acquaintances in real life had fairly benign experiences. Many of them mentioned friends and friends of friends who have had bad experiences meeting strangers they first met online.

One respondent in the queer group narrated a terrifying incident that occurred to them-

"I was 20 years old at the time and was chatting with a guy I had met on Facebook. We used to chat and from there we progressed to video calls. He had become a good friend. He knew I belonged to the (queer) community and he said that he did so as well. He responded to me and expressed a romantic interest in me.

We found ourselves attracted to each other and we had even done a few nude chats with each other. One day we decided to meet at a public place. It was supposed to be a casual meeting."

"He got his bike, we spoke for a bit and finally, he asked me if we wanted to move a little away for privacy. I agreed and sat behind him on his bike. We had just turned a corner when he got a call which he picked up while driving the bike. He said, "Yes, I am bringing him." This is when I first got scared."

"I thought of jumping out of the bike but then I began thinking - I am a Muslim and he was Maharashtrian Hindu. It may not be about religion but if anything were to happen, people, the police and society would hold me responsible. All he had to do was yell 'thief' in my direction and I would be thrashed publicly."

"In 2 minutes, he stopped the bike. It was a dark and quiet street. As I got off the bike, I could see 2 guys coming our way. They asked, "What are you guys doing here?" I understood what was going on and I also realized that I had no option. I had to play along."

"They kicked me and I started crying. I was thinking of episodes of Crime Patrol and thought that they would kill me. I gave them my mobile, wallet and watch."

"Then the guy whom I had met on Facebook said, "What all we have to do to catch people like you!" He opened his phone and showed me a video of another boy who was crying and begging for mercy. Then he took my video as well. They told me that they would take me to the police station and then my home and tell them that I was gay. I was scared to think what would happen if he takes me to the police station and I'm revealed to be both Muslim and gay. He warned me that if I shared the incident with anyone, he would share my video on Instagram and Facebook. Then he asked me to sit on the bike again and dropped me on the main road. As I got off the bike, I couldn't stop crying. Then he hit me again. Just so that people watching us would think that I had done something wrong."

"At home I said that I lost everything in an auto. I was literally going to commit suicide that day. It was my good luck that my sister was home that day and I was not alone. She's the reason I'm alive today. I still don't know what action I can take against him."

What was worrying about this case is that the respondent had followed the prescribed tenets of online safety and through communication and exchange, had gradually built up trust. Despite that, on account of various factors, including on-ground socio-cultural dynamics, he was entrapped in a sextortion scam.*

* We connected the respondent to a support group that promised assistance in both healing and justice. The offending account has been reported to the Facebook safety team.

We also gathered two personal experiences in which the respondents reported a happy experience:

1. "I had dialed a wrong number, then he started messaging me. Initially I did not give him much attention but then we started talking and after 6 months he proposed to me. At that time, I told him that we should just talk like we used to. Then one day when I was visiting my relatives in the neighboring city, he told me that his house was close by. I was a little nervous when I went to meet him. But we met. And we continue to talk on the phone. Now, I feel safer that he and I are not in the same city. That reduces the chances of my neighbors or family finding out about us."

2. "A profile was recommended to me on Facebook and I sent a friend request. I didn't know her. She accepted and we spoke in 'hi -hellos'. After 2 to 3 weeks, we got very close and kept chatting with each other all day. Then we exchanged numbers and we spoke more on the phone. And then we got closer and it progressed to friendship and then something romantic. Then we met in a garden. Both of us were very particular that we should meet in a public place. I felt really nice at the meeting. It felt good. It was a memorable and exciting experience."

Unwanted Direct Messages and Comments

87% of the respondents across all groups mentioned accessing areas of social media that was prone to unwanted, inappropriate and even abusive messages and comments as fraught with risk. This included the direct messaging functions of Facebook and Instagram, comments sections of YouTube and TikTok, the voice chat on PUBG as well as messaging apps like WhatsApp (with WhatsApp groups being highlighted as particularly rife with risk). The messages could range from unwanted attempts to make acquaintance to sexual solicitation to hate speech to cyber bullying. The respondents mentioned that the risk could come from already existing contacts as well as strangers. (A few respondents highlighted that backlash for political opinions was mostly made by strangers). Once again, the girl groups and the queer group expressed a greater degree of worry over this issue.

Increased Risks on account of seeking Attention and Engagement

83% respondents mentioned the risk entailed in blindly indulging in activities spurred on by a need for popularity and attention. There were primarily two kinds of content mentioned – content that involved putting the body such as pulling off a stunt as well as sexually risqué content. Respondents mentioned that users in an attempt to seek engagement and attention would lean into edgier content like performing increasingly provocative stunts or making progressively shocking fashion and photography choices. The content in search of engagement would then move into territory that put the user at potentially greater risk.

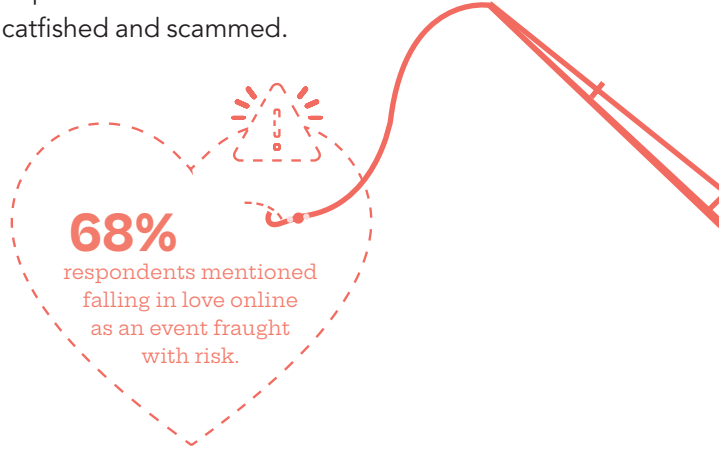
Hackers

71% mentioned the risk of hackers who were extremely technologically proficient, who would steal their online persona and data leading to misuse of their accounts. There was also a heightened perception among respondents that hackers would use stolen online identity to frame the misdeeds that they committed on the victims whose accounts were compromised.

Falling in Love

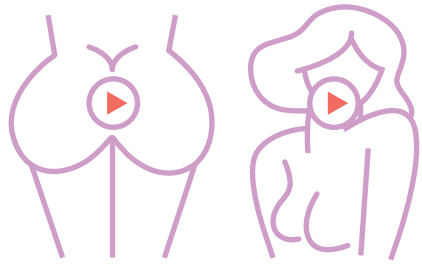
68% respondents mentioned falling in love online as an event fraught with risk. Under the laws as well as the social milieu of the country, children and young people in love are already an at-risk category. This is compounded by the risks of an intimate online encounter with a stranger. Respondents felt that being in an online relationship put them in a vulnerable position on account of the personal nature of content being shared, the scope and nature of trust involved, the fear of the relationship becoming exposed, potential backlash from family and society among other factors.

Most respondents mentioned having friends who met their lovers and partners over the internet. Some of their friends had good experiences while others were catfished and scammed.



Pornography and Age-Inappropriate Content

65% respondents mentioned coming across pornographic material as an online risk.



Major concerns around pornography were that others would come to know what they are watching. They also feared that they would stumble upon pornographic imagery when they were not looking for it. They had moral and ethical concerns on whether it was good or bad for them.

They were confused as to whether it was normal to watch pornography or whether it would influence them in a negative manner. Those who had younger siblings were extremely worried about their younger siblings coming across any inappropriate content when the phone was shared with them.

Financial Fraud

65% mentioned financial fraud and online scams as risks. Many of them had been funnelled towards these risks by clicking on unverified advertisements found on social media platforms. Examples of the advertisements were those offering spurious products, products for much less than market rates, more likes on the social media profile, money, mobile recharge and job opportunities.

"I had applied for the CISF exam. I used to watch preparatory videos on YouTube. While I was watching the video, I was constantly shown ads for a particular channel that claimed to be providing tutorials for the same. The books for the exam were very expensive and this person promised to courier it to me from Jaipur at half the price. He just asked us (me and my friend) to transfer the money through Paytm or Google Pay. We sent him the money but we still have not got the books. We were added to a WhatsApp group where he gives out these advertisements. Whenever we call him up to ask about the books, he just says that he will send it to us in a couple of days and stalls us."

Gaming Addiction

60% mentioned gaming addiction as a risk. Popular games like PUBG, Free Fire, Candy Crush etc. were cited as some of the most addictive platforms. Other than the compulsively playable game design, respondents mentioned competition and peer pressure on multiplayer platforms as reasons for their problematic relationship to gaming.

Suicide Challenges

Most respondents had heard of either the Blue Whale or the Momo Challenge but they were largely confused about its authenticity and questioned as to whether or not these challenges were real. Many of them had tried to download the Blue Whale app but had received no response.

Other Risks

Plagiarism, writing political comments, viruses, pranks, hidden cameras, wasting time, piracy, fake sites, fake apps, which featured sexually explicit or gross content as well as targeted advertisements were some of the other risks mentioned.

Lack of Platonic Spaces for Queer Communities

Respondents in the queer group highlighted a key issue about lack of platonic spaces: ***"There are very few spaces online dedicated to those who identify as queer, that allow them to mingle platonically. This lack of space pushes the community towards more sexualized and hypersexualized areas like dating & hookup apps. And hence, before you've learned to even mingle in the community and learn about it, you end up in scenarios that present some amount of risk."***

Fake Accounts

Just 13% of all respondents had made accounts under fake names. The boys' groups mentioned that fake accounts were created to prank other male friends by pretending to be girls interested in them. Some of them would use the IDs to hatch a little scheme to get their friend to recharge their phone. However, the girls group mentioned that they were frequently approached and even harassed by boys who set up fake accounts on social media. There was also an incident mentioned where a respondent's sister was victimized and sexually harassed by an act of impersonation:

"My sister has an Instagram account. Someone took all her pictures and started a new account with her pictures and lewd captions. The comment section was abusive. My sister went to the police station and filed a complaint. After a few days that account got deactivated."

What are the Safety Rules that You Follow?

Contrary to popular perception that children and young people cannot understand the risks associated with the internet, it was observed that almost every group had immense awareness of the general safety rules on the internet.

Below is a list of safety rules that were mentioned by the respondents across all the five cities:

"I don't put up personal pictures on social media."

"I delete the history of videos that I have watched (on shared devices)."

"I keep my account private so that no one (unknown person) will follow me."

"I hide stories/status from friends and acquaintances that I don't trust."

"I block unknown followers."

"I use strict privacy settings."

"I hide my 'last seen' on WhatsApp because if my family members get to know that I stay online for so long they would not like it and I will be scolded and admonished."

"I use long, strong and complicated passwords."

"I make it a point to not "show-off" online. I am as real online as I am offline and I feel it keeps me safe. A lot of people take risks to live up to their online personas."

"I block people when I do not want to talk to them and if I feel like speaking to them again, I unblock them."

"If I am browsing a website and receive a warning that the website is unsafe, I never revisit that website again. If I visit a website and there are too many pop ups, I never visit it again."

"I hide my mobile number from the internet. I don't want the number to be leaked."

"I do not post things that can attract controversy and online hate."

"I do not store stranger's numbers and add only those who I know on WhatsApp."

"I don't post photos at all."

"I always use the 'only friends' option for sharing on Facebook."

"I do not give 'public' access (to any of my social media posts)."

"I am always alert and I always use the internet within limits (of general propriety). We are not safe if we do not use internet within our limits"

"If you are meeting someone online, ask them for multiple pictures of themselves in particular poses. If they are using stock images or found images, they get cornered and exposed."

"I keep my device clean and use antivirus software."

"I never download anything from suspicious links."

"I never install apps from other than the Play Store."

Fake Accounts for Safety

If one considers the queer group, 50% respondents mentioned using fake identities on the internet. They viewed fake accounts as a safety strategy to orient themselves with spaces online.

"When we are still learning about ourselves, and are still in the closet, fake IDs was the way to test out this other persona and get a feel of and understand the community. Once I started getting more confident and I came out at home, I switched to my real name."

Some respondents from the girls' groups also mentioned creating and using accounts under fake names so as to avoid coming to the notice of their family.

Critiquing Resilience

Digital resilience is the social-emotional literacy and digital competency required to positively respond to, and deal with, any risks they might be exposed to online (Day, 2016). Almost all the children and young people we spoke to claimed to have developed 'resilience' as an outcome of encountering a spectrum of online risks mentioned above. However, most believed that this situation should have ideally been prevented. They were clear in not wanting the incidents which taught them to develop resilience to happen to another child or young person.

Reporting Mechanism

Over 69% respondents knew about reporting mechanisms to report content & behaviour on social media platforms. They all claimed to have used them at some time. However, they mentioned that the systems were sometimes too complicated to use as they were presented with too many options. This dissuaded some of them from reporting.

They mentioned that the results of the reporting were largely less than satisfactory. Many respondents also mentioned that abusive and hurtful posts based on religion, caste and sexuality were not taken down despite reporting them to the platforms.

The survivor in the aforementioned case of extortion and assault mentioned that even though he had reported the Facebook page of his abuser, it continued to be functional on the platform. He felt that this was actively endangering other members of the queer community on Facebook.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Queer children and girls had **deeper and more wide-ranging concerns** over internet safety risks than cis-het boys.

- Queer children and young people faced greater risks because of a **lack of spaces online dedicated to queer people** that were not sexualized.

- Boys claimed to largely **make fake accounts** to prank their friends. Girls reported boys making fake accounts to approach and harass them anonymously. However, queer children and girls viewed fake accounts as a safety strategy through which they anonymously navigated communities online and orient themselves to spaces and then decided if they were comfortable revealing their personal details.

- Most children and young people knew about reporting mechanisms on platforms and also used them. However, **they found the systems too complicated to use and the choices they had to make during the process dissuaded them from reporting.** They found the results of the reporting to be largely less than satisfactory.

- Some of the risky activities online according to children and young people include:
  - Sharing pictures and videos of themselves.
  - Meeting strangers online.
  - Accessing areas of social media prone to unwanted, inappropriate and even abusive messages and comments.
  - Blindly indulging in activities spurred on by a need for popularity and attention like stunts or sexually risqué behavior.
  - Hackers stealing their online personas and data and misusing their accounts.
  - Falling in love online.
  - Access to pornographic material.
  - Financial Fraud and Online Scams.
  - Gaming addiction.

- Internet **safety was a priority for children and young people.** They were aware of basic safety rules to be followed online. However, they expressed the need to learn more.

- Despite acquiring **resilience after overcoming internet risks, children and young people felt that safety should be ensured online** and that no other person should face risks in the manner that they had to.

~~SAFE~~

~~PROTECTED~~

~~PERFECT~~

~~UTOPIAN~~

V. AN IDEAL INTERNET

We asked the respondents to think of conditions that in their opinion would create an ideal internet. A sample of the most striking suggestions has been produced on the right.

"The Internet should be fast. Strong network should be available throughout."

"There should be no hacking of accounts. Users should have full control of their accounts, data and content. I should be in control. If I don't want anyone to connect to me, I should be able to ensure that."

"Boys and girls should not have separate rules and unequal access."

"Everyone should be friendlier with each other and regard each other as fellow human beings. Everybody must find a place to belong and that community must exist peacefully with other communities."

"It should be for people of all ages but some areas should have age restrictions."

"There should be no disinformation. We should have reliable information."

"There should be more free material. Free movies. Free music. Free educational material."

"Whoever wants to express their thoughts must be able to express their thoughts."

"Before putting apps on Play Store, the authenticity of every app should be thoroughly checked and inquired."

"People should have full knowledge of privacy of the sites where they post pictures and videos."

"There should be guest log-ins."

"There should be no advertisements."

"It must make communication easier & smoother. Even if I want to talk to the prime minister, the internet should make it possible. Whoever wants to express their thoughts must be able to express their thoughts."

"It should be a place that gives younger people more power to take positive action."

"There should be safety- no one should take advantage of what I do on the internet."

"When I create something, I want the internet to acknowledge that it was me who created it."

"If any problem occurs, I want a quick response that solves my problem."

I want the mindset of our parents and elders around the internet to change. I want them to understand that times have changed, that we are living in the present and they are living in the past."

VI. THE COVID CODA

"This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong."

UNICEF Data Hub, October 2020

"The biggest US tech companies set aside their growing political troubles on Thursday to disclose the latest leg of their seemingly unstoppable business ascendance: a stunning boom in digital markets has lifted their fortunes at a time when much of the global economy is hurting."

The Financial Times, October 2020

Children and young people risk being among the pandemic's biggest victims. The unequal distribution of the pandemic's harmful effects is expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, poorest neighborhoods and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations. The UNICEF Data Hub reports that the number of children living in monetary-poor households could increase by 142 million by the end of 2020. 36 million children risk going hungry, globally. 80 million children under the age of 1 in at least 68 countries may miss out on receiving life-saving vaccines. Additionally, over 2 million children under-five could die during October 2020 to October 2021 due to the impact of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020).

The lockdown also deprived those children and young people who sought safe spaces outside of their homes, particularly those who were living within incompatible or even abusive milieus.

By all accounts, children's education has currently regressed to an extremely bleak state. According to UNICEF's Remote Reachability Report, 2020, two thirds of the world's school-age children – or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 years old – do not have internet connection in their homes. In India, over 1.5 million (15 lakh) schools have been closed due to the pandemic affecting 286 million (28.6 crore) children from pre-primary to secondary levels, (of which 49% are girls) This adds to the 6 million (60 lakh) girls and boys who were already out of school prior to COVID-19. However, in the face of such demand, only 24% of Indian households have had internet connections to access e-education (UNICEF, 2020).

The closer one examines the digital divide, further gaps emerge. Some of which include:

The rural-urban gap

Urban areas have over 104 internet subscriptions per 100 people while the figure for rural areas is a little over 27 (Executive Summary on Report- Health in India, NSS 75th round, n.d.)

The gender gap

While 79% men own a mobile phone in the country, the number for women is 63% (Rowntree & Shanahan, 2020).

The age gap

Only 53% of those studying for graduation have an internet connection- a number that steadily reduces as one goes further down from university to high school to primary to pre-primary (Executive Summary on Report- Health in India, NSS 75th round, n.d.)

The financial gap

For millions of Indians living below poverty line who are not sure of securing two square meals a day, even a monthly usage charge of Rs. 200 (US$ 3) is too high, not to mention the device cost (Maheshwari & Sridhar, 2020).

Lack of access has proved to be the most severe kind of safety issue where it has led many cases of children dying by suicide (Pande &

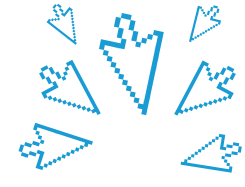
Prajapati, 2020). And while access is key, children and families are struggling to cope with a cascading rise in online risks, some of which include:

Misinformation:

A study on misinformation in India by scholars from the University of Michigan, released on April 18, 2020, has shown a rise in the number of debunked stories, particularly after the announcement of *janata* curfew by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 22, 2020, and the countrywide lockdown two days later, to contain the spread of COVID-19. From just two in the third week of January 2020, the instances of debunked misinformation rose to sixty by the first week of April 2020 (Akbar, Kukreti, Sagarika, & Pal, 2020).

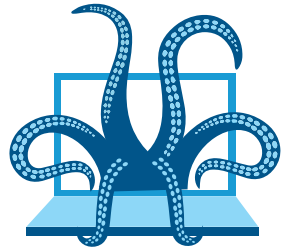
Ransomware, Online Scams and Frauds:

Cybercriminals see a remote, distracted, and vulnerable online population as opportune targets. They have adapted to exploit the pandemic using Covid-themed ransomware, scam URLs and spam (Beek, Dunton, Flaherty, Lynda, & Steve, 2020). India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval has gone on record regarding financial fraud stating that there has been an increase of 500% in cybercrimes. (The Wire, 2020).



Cyberbullying:

Highlighting that cyberbullying is on the rise, the UN organization, UNESCO attributed this to the COVID-19 pandemic. More students than ever were "living, learning and socializing online". This had led to an "unprecedented increase in screen time and the merging of online and offline worlds", heightening youngsters' vulnerability to bullying and cyberbullying. While bullying is most often carried out by children's peers, in some cases teachers and other school staff are also believed to be responsible (UNESCO, 2020).



Child sexual abuse material:

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) says the coronavirus lockdown has contributed to "accelerating numbers" of public reports of child sexual abuse to its hotline. In September 2020, the IWF processed 15,258 reports from members of the public, 45% more than in September 2019. From January to September 2020, the IWF has already processed a total of 230,520 reports. In 2019, itself a record year, the analysts from IWF processed 260,400 reports (IWF, 2020). The National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the USA released figures for the reports of online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) that they received in 2019. **The highest number of uploads of suspected CSAM was from India as per geographical indicators related to the content. The figure reported is a sobering 1,987,430 pieces of content.**

At the same time, technology, particularly big tech has been among the pandemic's biggest gainers. They have proved resilient in the face of the current global crisis.

Their products and services have kept systems going by helping facilitate contactless deliveries and payments, all kinds of communication, remote work, entertainment and leisure, telehealth, research, contact tracing, supply chains, and even distance learning for those who can access it (Xiao & Fan, 2020). They have entrenched themselves in the systems which maintain our lives, livelihoods and lifestyles. Subsequently, their profit and influence have increased significantly (Lopatto, 2020).

This accumulation of indispensability, power and capital by big tech has meant that those without meaningful access to their products and services may be put in extremely vulnerable and at-risk positions.

All these factors add up to an urgent scenario that needs to be addressed in a comprehensive manner where risks and threats need to be mitigated as part of a singular and sustainable framework. The push for online learning and inclusion of children and young people needs to be qualified with meaningful access, security, privacy, agency and inclusion among other factors. If more children and young people are to enter the online space, they need to be given their rights. A sustainable ecosystem in which they can thrive needs to be created. All in all, as we attempt to conceive it, we will soon realize that a better internet for children and young people will not be very different from a better internet for everyone.

VII. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning and Awareness: In School and Outside of It

Age-appropriate digital skills education must be instituted from primary school onwards. This effort must not be limited only to the formal schooling systems. Out of school children and young adults must be engaged through outreach via civil society networks and other community spaces.

An Open, Neutral and Diverse Internet

Policies and regulations must be framed to ensure that the internet remains open and neutral. Children and young people must be enabled with valid choices to experience and participate in a diverse range of online experiences.

Meaningful and Affordable Connectivity for All

We must ensure meaningful access to internet connections as well as internet and communication technology for all children and young people. The Alliance for affordable Internet's definition for meaningful connectivity can be adopted as the desired framework. Efforts must be made to extend uniform high speed broadband connectivity to every corner of the country in a time bound manner while ensuring devices and data are affordable for all.

Safe Spaces for all and Empowerment for the Vulnerable

Safe spaces for all children and young people must be created on the internet with special attention and affirmative action considered for children belonging to marginalized identities. Platforms must adopt and enforce a standard of safety that enables all users to stay safe from as well as take action against harassment and abuse. Apart from safety as a function, **platforms must facilitate a community-based system that can be accessed as avenues for care, support and solidarity.**

Creating Safer Ecosystems for Exploration

Platforms must segregate content around sexual and reproductive health, sex, sexuality, gender and bodies from pornographic content and ensure that users searching for the former don't access the later. This must be supplemented by on-ground training on comprehensive sexuality education for children and young people in formal and informal settings. **Stringent but rights-respecting mechanisms need to be put**

in place to take down and investigate child sexual abuse material along with comprehensive services that can identify and rehabilitate victims.

Leaning Away from Criminalization, towards Fair Regulation

Policies and laws around safety must acknowledge that **freedom of expression, anonymity, fake name accounts are not just exploited by bad actors but are also strategies used by the most vulnerable users to stay secure.** In that light criminalization and prohibition must be judicious. Regulations should be considered in a balanced manner and within the framework of democratic principles.

Wellbeing as a Device Feature

More digital wellbeing features need to be developed and provided/ pre-loaded on to devices. Awareness of their presence and functionality needs to be amplified.

Building Robust Information Ecosystems

Content and information ecosystems must be strengthened on platforms so that it can resist the dissemination of disinformation. Systems must predict and preventively act against disinformation, be responsive in strategizing against its evolving nature as well as be capable of funneling users towards reliable sources of information. **Children and young people perform the function of fact checkers within their households and communities and can be engaged as strategic actors in combatting disinformation.**

Multidimensional Solutions: Online and On-Ground

To make the internet a safer space for the young, socio-cultural contexts and class-caste-gender locations are as important as technological innovations and multi-stakeholder partnerships. **Implementation of all recommendations must be sensitive and affirmatively respond to the dynamics of gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, caste and age.**

Clear Policies, Uniform Enforcement

Policies and regulations that shape the internet must keep in mind the best interests and development of children and young people. They must be **formulated through consultation with stakeholders as well as groups that adequately represent the interest of a diverse spectrum of users.** Policies and regulations must be articulated with clarity and enforced in uniform and equitable manner.

VIII. Rethinking Internet Safety Frameworks towards an Ideal Internet for Children and Young People

Most children and young people in India we spoke to were aware of multiple risks they faced when navigating the internet. Along with gauging their awareness, their responses also enabled us to identify the scope and sites of the risk. They perceived the specter of online risk as a diffuse element in a larger ecosystem that includes the on-ground, the online, the private and the public. Their material realities, the socio-cultural context they live in, their class-caste location, as well as internet infrastructure, technology, platforms, laws, policies, online communities etc. actively determine where the child is located on the risk-danger spectrum.

The need of the hour is a comprehensive framework that takes into account the entire range of factors and reimagines and harmonizes them such that risks to children and young people are minimized even as they are presented with all the opportunities and benefits of an ideal internet.

IX. A Framework for Cyber Positivity

Cyber Positivity (drawing from concepts like body positivity, sex positivity etc.) is an attitude towards the engagement of all children and young people with the internet that acknowledges and affirms the online space as a critical site where they experience growth, development, learning and life. As such, it posits that they should be able to do so without fear and shame.

Existing norms cast children and young people primarily as some of the most at-risk populations on the internet who are constantly in reaching distance of some crisis or another. This view necessitates a protective, even repressive framework for awareness, education and policy that may not even have adequate space to consider their age, development and evolving capacities.

Cyber Positivity revisits, recasts and reimagines existing norms into a framework which primarily believes that the internet must enable every child and young person towards achieving their full potential. The framework fosters respect for the unique profile of each child and young person. It emphasizes critical thinking, enables autonomy, promotes expression and engagement, encourages learning and leisure and values safety and freedom from all kinds of violence and coercion.

The framework hopes to envision and work towards a Cyber Positive ecosystem which includes at its heart the children and young people themselves as well as their families, peer groups, communities, schools and other institutions, governments and corporates. This ecosystem seamlessly integrates the online and the offline as well as the social, cultural, economic and political, to ensure that every child fulfills their full potential.

Towards putting together the framework for Cyber Positivity, six pillars are proposed. Each pillar has three degrees with the first degree being a basic right and the third being aspirational and signifying the achievement of full potential.

The 6 Pillars of Cyber Positivity

ACCESS - INCLUSION - PLURALITY

Access to the internet is the basic right of every child. Inclusion signifies a representational equality. Plurality suggests a functioning equality.

E.g.: Girls interviewed for this study had access to the internet. Some of the girls, who had access, also had social media accounts. The need is to ensure that they are enabled with choices where they can participate in social media interactions in a manner that they feel is meaningful.

LITERACY - LEARNING - APPLICATION

Literacy is the basic right. Learning is the continuing process of acquiring skill and knowledge and finally, Application signifies the skill and learning being put to use.

E.g.: A 13-year-old girl from a lower socio-economic neighborhood uses Facebook and YouTube to learn Korean. The girl must now find a platform where her skills and knowledge can be sustainably applied.

EXPLORATION - ASSIMILATION - EXPRESSION

Children explore new ideas, knowledge and platforms on the internet. After which there is an attempt to reconcile with these new facets and facts. Only then is meaning expression possible.

E.g.: Boys are curious about pornography. However, even as they watch it, they are unable to assimilate this new information and have a million questions and are unable to verbalize them for the lack of vocabulary, safe platforms etc. They now need a safe platform to engage with, which respects their agency and choices even as it gives them the right information.

SAFETY - REDRESSAL - JUSTICE

Safety is a basic right. Followed by a strong redressal system. And justice, of course, remains aspirational.

E.g.: Most respondents had safety as a priority. And most seemed to ask for strong redressal systems, which were either on the platform or were informal. They wanted the justice system to be involved but only in serious cases.

ANONYMITY - PRIVACY - AUTONOMY

As we are dealing with children, the baseline has to necessarily be located in total 'anonymity' in the best interest of the child. A young child is still learning the concept of privacy. And when the concept of privacy is clear, one can exercise personal sovereignty, choice and autonomy.

E.g.: When exploring any dating app or new social media platform, the respondents mentioned that they like to initially explore the platform anonymously. They use this period of anonymity to gauge the level of privacy that they are comfortable with. And lastly, with regards to autonomy, as a girl in the queer group said – ***"Now I put whatever I want on my social media and if you don't like it, I don't care… I don't want to associate with you."***

LEISURE, SELF-CARE & CREATIVITY

Every child has a right to leisure. There is a kind of leisure that enables children to relax and de-stress. And then there is leisure that leads to creativity.

E.g.: The children who progressed from consuming videos to starting their own video channels.

The elements of the pillar need to be further defined by practitioners, academicians and policy makers. Further questions also need to be worked on.

a) What are the values needed to achieve and sustain a particular pillar?

b) What are the infrastructure and design developments needed to achieve and sustain the pillar?

c) What are the policies and regulations needed to achieve and sustain this pillar?

d) What are the knowledge and skills that the child needs to achieve and sustain this pillar?

X. The Basic Do's and Don'ts of Developing and Delivering a Cyber Positive Internet Safety Module

Do have empowering, inspirational content as part of the module

Internet safety modules should necessarily cite cautionary statistics and case studies. However, balancing it with the positive uses of online spaces citing opportunities available and citing positive case studies is empowering and motivating for children and young people. It will also enable parents and teachers to be more permissive and progressive with regards to their children's internet use.

Don't have a fear-based approach

Citing worst-case scenarios, using dark imagery and excessive emphasis on dangers can spread panic not just among children and young people but also among those who monitor and supervise children's online presence. This may result in further surveillance and control and risks alienating children and young people.

Do get technical

Most children and young people are curious to learn about the technical and practical aspects of handsets, computers and platforms. The facilitator must have basic technical aptitude. If you can help a child fix a bug on their Facebook profile, they will listen to you when you talk about personal data.

Don't dismiss adjacent queries

It is not uncommon during an internet safety workshop to hear a question regarding where one can get reliable information on menstruation and sexual health. The facilitator must enable the child to navigate the web to find a trusted source. Children and young people see online and on -ground spaces as a continuum and queries that are adjacent to the core issues must not be dismissed but should rather be engaged with and answered.

Do know your Training Group

Internet safety is a vast topic and various groups have diverse expectations and different manners in which they access and use the internet. Having a general idea of what the group wants you to address beforehand helps increase relevance and engagement in the session.

Don't dismiss Socio-Cultural-Economic Realities of the Training Group

Quality and manner of internet usage as well as the attendant risks and opportunities depend on socio-cultural-economic realities of the training group. Risks related to apps promising faster internet may not be needed for groups who live in relatively prosperous neighborhoods but are the basics of safety for someone living in a marginalized neighborhood. Similarly, in mixed gender groups, boys tend to dominate the conversation because they have had a greater and more diverse exposure to the internet than others. This needs to be acknowledged and factored in and spaces for diverse voices to be heard need to be created.

Do be Age Appropriate

While it is good to start early with internet safety messages, it is important to consider the age of the group so as to be relevant and appropriate with content and messaging.

Don't overlook diversity

The internet is an extremely plural space and therefore the content and design of the training module and session must be inclusive of class, caste, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Do have a rights-based approach

Ensure that the module communicates to children and young people their basic Rights to Access, Privacy, Expression, Safety and Participation.

Don't have an individual-centric approach

Ensure the module emphasizes that one is always part of communities and networks online. Hence, while one exercises one's right, one must ensure that another's rights are not impinged upon.

Do Call it Internet Safety

It is about comprehensively staying safe on the internet.

Don't Call it Online Safety

Addressing only online aspects of the issue is only half the picture.

Do encourage critical thinking and alternatives

Network effects, monopolies and lack of interoperability can result in less than diverse and restrictive internet experiences. Ensure that your module encourages children and young people to seek out diverse spaces and online cultures.

Don't give the state or big tech a free pass

Internet policy and regulation is a new and contested area and everyone is learning. There are various points of views around internet shutdowns, app bans etc. Discuss the wide range of views in your modules and do not just stick to the official line.

Do Stay Updated

The internet is a dynamic topic and children and youn people tend to be at its cutting edge. The content in the module must be examined for possible updating frequently.

Don't be afraid of Talking about Tough Subjects

Subjects like pornography, internet censorship, internet shutdowns, online abuse and vitriol against minority communities are realities that children and young people face or hear about. The module must enable them to understand and articulate these issues.

XI. THE IDEAL INTERNET CONSORTIUM

As the next step towards finding meaningful solutions to the challenges faced by children and young people on the internet, working groups titled the Ideal Internet Consortium was established. The members of the consortium came from varied backgrounds ranging from child rights, queer rights, women's rights, digital rights, disability rights, sexuality education, internet and digital literacy groups, mental health and policy research.

Based on the findings of the study, they raised the following concerns and points that needed further expansion:

→ The digital citizenship framework was suggested as a guide to **define the set of core values** that can guide access, inclusion and expression.

→ Safety is an important element to consider while defining meaningful expression and engagement in online spaces. **If a child does not feel safe online then their engagement is limited.** Spaces for children on the internet should be safe for children to explore.

→ **Meaningful access** is a key aspect which affects the experiences that children have in online spaces as well as their ability to express.

→ **Involving children's voices** and keeping children at the centre of the discourse is important. Amplifying their voices while creating structures and programs 'with them' instead of 'for them' is the need of the hour.

→ Children must be provided with the **necessary information resources** and robust grievance redressal mechanisms.

→ Having a **sense of community** and a non- judgmental space is essential for meaningful exploration and expression.

→ Being part of an ecosystem helps children and young people gain knowledge and pick up relevant skills. At the same time being part of the community should not hamper their critical thinking abilities by enclosing them in echo chambers. **Critical thinking** is very important when talking about robust expression and engagements in online spaces. If a particular community is turning toxic for them, there should be an option to come out of that space and find the alternatives, without biases or peer-pressure dragging them down.

→ More attention should be directed towards children who have **'non–keyboard' based interactions** with the internet like - camera/video based and voice-based interactions with the internet while designing safety mechanisms.

→ The **interoperability of a platform also affects the expression on it.** For e.g., the popularity of TikTok was also because the content created on it could be easily shared and disseminated on other platforms. The level of functionality with which children are able to create something on their own with a minimum level of equipment and a certain level of skill helps them participate and explore in the ecosystems that they are a part of.

→ If learning is one of the desirable outcomes, **access must necessarily be defined** in terms that facilitate interaction with multi-media content.

→ Children are used as proxies or justifications for undermining internet based rights. Some **limitations like those for child sexual abuse material are necessary** but breaking encryption and creating age based restricted zones may not be in their best interest.

→ **Personal data and privacy will play a large part** in the discussions and to command it from different perspectives will be useful.

→ Children are the only last section of the society that one is allowed to be paternalistic towards because when

it comes to children one makes the assumption that one always knows what is best for them. For example, there is often talk about state surveillance and surveillance by big tech. However, **surveillance by families is rarely discussed** especially for certain categories of children, for whom their parents might themselves be a threat, e.g., LGBTQIA+ children. Children may also need to have private lives to explore their own identities and sexualities and if their parents were to be constantly monitoring them, it could make them vulnerable to violence, harassment etc. within their own homes.

→ **Most children use shared mobiles in the community** and every family has an internal family privacy model. Even though children do not have a legal standing and they are subjected to paternalistic attitudes, they do make certain negotiations with their immediate families or systems to navigate those paternalistic gazes.

→ **Digital literacy is not only dependent on age** but has larger correlations with contextual determinants such as– culture, geography, social factors, economic background, accessibility, etc.

→ **Digital literacy is a lifelong learning process.** It can vary depending on the spaces and systems around an individual to enable it.

→ Civil societies need to develop and advocate for nuanced communications in a way that the **messaging moves away from self-regulation** and does not put the burden of safety on the children and caregivers.

The Consortium was originally envisioned as a series of consultations held in various locations across the country. The pandemic and lockdown resulted in it being compressed to a few online meetings. It ended up as a curtailed and more limited process than initially imagined.

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