How Young Indians Navigate Digital Life

Findings from the **Student Cyber Resilience Education and Empowerment Nationwide (SCREEN)** Survey 2026

YLAC

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About Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC)

Founded in 2016, Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC) aims to increase the participation of young people in the policymaking process and build their capacity to lead change. Our interventions are designed to equip citizens with a better understanding of the society they live in and the challenges that it confronts. The aim is to help young people broaden their perspective, think critically about their socio-political construct, tap their leadership potential, and acquire skills to create a long-lasting impact. As citizenship today extends deeply into the digital spaces, YLAC has placed an intentional focus on interventions around digital citizenship and online safety of youth.

About the YLAC Digital Champions Program

In an era where technology and the internet pervade all aspects of our lives, it has become crucial to build a strong understanding of online safety, especially among young people. To facilitate this, in 2021, YLAC initiated the **Digital Champions Program** – an intervention that supports young people across the nation to develop a strong foundation of digital citizenship skills. Over the years, we have reached more than **47,000** students across **285+** schools in low-income communities across **12 states**.

The program aims to provide students with knowledge about different aspects of digital safety and well-being, and equip them with tools to deal with potential threats and risks on the internet. Through the Digital Champions Program, our vision is to empower students to become conscious consumers of information available in the digital world and foster a healthier, more meaningful relationship with technology.

About the SCREEN Survey and its Relevance

To design effective interventions on online safety and digital well-being, and to shape policies that meaningfully respond to young people's realities, it is essential to understand how they experience the internet in their everyday lives.
The Student Cyber Resilience Education and Empowerment Nationwide (SCREEN) Survey seeks to contribute to this understanding by capturing young people's perspectives on how they access the internet, how they use digital platforms, the challenges and risks they encounter, and the forms of support they need to engage safely and confidently online.

This edition draws on responses from 3,907 young people aged 11–30 across diverse regions, educational settings, and socio-economic contexts, this report documents lived experiences related to online safety, digital privacy, exposure to harm, and trust in digital platforms. The findings aim to generate evidence-based insights to inform policy development, advocacy efforts, and platform design, with young people's voices placed at the centre of analysis.

This survey builds on YLAC's earlier research conducted through the Digital Champions Program, which engaged over 10,000 students over two years and culminated in the Children's Digital Future Roundtable in December 2023. SCREEN expands this foundation through a broader national reach and a deeper focus on capturing the evolving and nuanced digital experiences of young people.

About Youth Ki Awaaz (YKA)

Youth Ki Awaaz (YKA) is India's largest citizen-led media and civic participation platform, enabling over 200,000 young people every month to tell their stories, share their perspectives, and drive change. For 17 years, YKA has worked at the intersection of **storytelling, data, and grassroots mobilisation**, placing youth participation at the centre of public discourse and policy. It has led on-ground, youth-led projects and digital campaigns on critical issues including climate resilience, menstrual health, education access, and mental health.

YKA's approach goes beyond numbers - enabling hyperlocal, participatory storytelling and polling to build local narratives, capture youth sentiment, civic behaviour, and lived experiences to improve the larger landscape of civic engagement for young people.

With over **10 million data points**, YKA's insights have shaped national conversations on climate, menstrual health, digital rights, and inclusion, surfacing realities often invisible in traditional datasets and driving both narrative and policy shifts.

Through its development programs, campaigns and surveys, YKA brings young people's perspectives, stories and voices to the forefront to create a more just and equitable society for them by focusing on various youth-related issues, whether it is menstrual hygiene, access and quality of education, child marriage elimination, mental health, digital inclusion, career aspiration, among many others.

Executive Summary

India's young people now navigate one of the fastest-growing digital ecosystems in the world. Yet their experiences, risks, and coping strategies remain poorly documented. This report presents findings from the SCREEN (Student Cyber Resilience Education and Empowerment Nationwide) survey, capturing the digital lives of 3,907 young Indians aged 11 to 30 across 20 states. Through rigorous population weighting, these findings speak to the broader landscape of youth digital life in India, revealing patterns that demand attention from platforms, policymakers, parents, and young people themselves.

WHAT WE FOUND

Access is widespread but unequal

Smartphone access stands at 77.9%, with minimal gender variation in our sample (females 80.5%, males 76.7%) and no meaningful urban-rural divide in basic device ownership. These figures align with ASER Centre data showing 82.1% internet accessibility among rural youth aged 15 to 24 (ASER Centre, 2024). However, computer access tells a different story: 72.5% in metros versus just 36.5% in rural areas. This 36-percentage-point gap represents a capability divide with significant educational and economic implications.

Among 11 to 13 year-olds, 12.7% have unrestricted personal devices. 21.2% of the 17-18 year olds have a personal phone that they can use whenever they want to. For teenagers, shared devices are more common, creating both opportunities for parental supervision and risks of exposure to age-inappropriate content when devices pass between family members.

Screen time intensifies with age

Daily online use increases markedly with age. Overall, 30.1% of respondents spend between three and six hours online each day, making it the most common usage pattern However, lighter phone use is considerably more common among younger participants. Nearly half of respondents aged 11–13 (44.5%) report spending less than one hour per day on their phones.

A gender difference is also evident in daily online use. Males report heavier daily online use than females, with 34.7% spending three to six hours online compared to 25.5% of females, a pattern that may reflect gendered differences in leisure time availability and activity preferences.

Morning phone habits reveal deepening integration of devices into daily routines: 26.0% check their phones immediately upon waking, rising to 38.6% among those aged 25 to 30. Those who check immediately show higher rates of reporting tiredness, irritation, and mental exhaustion after extended use.

Harms come from known persons, not just strangers

Unwanted contact from known persons (37.9%) exceeds stranger-initiated contact (23.4%). This finding challenges the dominant "stranger danger" narrative that has shaped online safety discourse and suggests risk emerges substantially from within trusted networks: friends, acquaintances, classmates, and sometimes family members. The 17 to 18 age group reports the highest rates of unwanted contact from known persons at 53.1%, marking this transition period as particularly vulnerable.

Females experience higher rates of both known-person contact (39.3% versus 36.0% for males) and stranger contact (26.2% versus 20.5%), consistent with research documenting gendered harassment patterns in digital spaces (Williams, 2016).

Self Restraint on Social Media

Unrestricted self-expression online is uncommon, with **only 9.1% of respondents indicating that they express themselves without restraint**. The remaining 90% have modified their digital behaviour in some way due to anticipated consequences. The most common restraint involves posting photos and videos (18.2%), followed by starting conversations with strangers (12.4%) and sharing personal opinions (9.5%). Fear of judgment drives 19.5% of self-censorship decisions, while privacy concerns account for 11.2%.

Females (19.8%) are more likely than males (16.8%) to avoid posting photos of themselves, a 3-percentage-point gap that reflects gendered experiences of scrutiny and harassment. This strategic restraint represents both a rational response to hostile online environments and a potential cost to authentic self-expression.

Help-seeking is fragmented

No single support source dominates how young Indians respond to negative online experiences. Friends lead at 21.4%, followed by "no one" at 9.7%, parents at 9.4%, and schools at just 3.2%. Nearly one in ten young people process negative experiences entirely alone.

Males (10.9%) are more likely than females (8.6%) to tell no one. This pattern connects to broader research on masculinity and help-seeking, which documents how young men often view vulnerability disclosure as threatening to masculine identity (Gough & Novikova, 2020; Lynch et al., 2018). Regional variation in our sample is substantial: 17.1% tell no one in Eastern India compared with 7.4% in the South.

Platform literacy gaps persist

Only 37.1% respondents can use content reporting and moderation tools effectively. One in five (21.0%) are completely unaware such tools exist, rising to 29.3% in rural areas versus 14.1% in metros, and 38.2% among 11 to 13 year-olds. Among the youngest respondents, only 20.9% can use these tools effectively. This represents a significant gap in the population most recently entering digital spaces.

Heavy use correlates with emotional impact

Among all respondents, 17.4% report feeling tired, irritated, or mentally exhausted after extended online use. Compulsive scrolling past intended stopping points affects 16.0%, while 9.2% compare their bodies or lives to others online. Sleep disruption due to device use affects 7.9%. While correlation does not establish causation, these patterns suggest that engagement-maximizing design features may carry costs for user wellbeing, consistent with research on social media and adolescent mental health (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

WHY IT MATTERS

For platforms

The finding that 37.9% experience unwanted contact from known persons suggests privacy and safety tools must address intra-network harms, not just stranger-initiated contact. Current platform design often assumes the primary threat comes from unknown actors, but these data indicate that friction features, granular privacy controls within friend networks, and nuanced blocking options deserve investment.

The 21.0% tool awareness gap represents a massive gap in user education. Platforms can address this through improved onboarding, contextual guidance, and proactive safety feature promotion. The steep age gradient in tool literacy suggests particular attention to the youngest users entering digital spaces.

For policymakers

The urban-rural digital divide in computer access (72.5% versus 36.5%) reveals a nuanced gap in 'meaningful access', often masked when broader connectivity metrics are used. Policy frameworks under Digital India initiatives should also include digital safety competency metrics alongside connectivity targets.

The complexity of known-person risks requires regulatory approaches that move beyond simplistic age verification to address the full spectrum of online harms young Indians face. The regional variation in help-seeking patterns suggests culturally responsive interventions rather than uniform national approaches.

For parents and educators

The fragmented help-seeking landscape signals an opportunity for adults to position themselves as trusted resources. However, parental consultation drops precipitously from 22.5% among 11 to 13 year-olds to just 16.0% among those aged 17 to 18, suggesting that relationship-building must occur in early adolescence before help-seeking patterns become clear.

Schools serve as the leading formal safety information source (15.8%) but rank low for reactive help-seeking (3.2%). This gap between information provision and crisis support represents an opportunity for educational institutions to expand their role and integrate online safety education within the curriculum. This would also require upskilling teachers to deliver content on online safety and act as empathetic and informed first responders when needed.

For young people themselves

The high rates of self-restraint (over 90% holding something back) reflect a recognition (could be in the form of fear) of online risks and strategic choices about privacy and self expression. However, understanding the design features that drive compulsive use and emotional exhaustion can empower informed choices about digital engagement. Recognising that peers are the most common support source can encourage peer support networks while acknowledging that some situations benefit from adult involvement.

READING THIS REPORT

This report is designed for two audiences: young people navigating digital environments, and the practitioners, parents, and policymakers who support them. Technical terms are explained when first introduced. Weighted percentages reflect population-representative estimates, not raw survey counts. Where patterns emerge along age, gender, or location lines, we interpret them in light of existing research literature.

The report proceeds through four parts.

Part I: Foundations establishes operational definitions for key terms, introduces the research context, and explains methodology including population weighting procedures.

Part II: Access and Usage examines device access patterns, platform ecosystems, and screen time behaviours.

Part III: Safety and Wellbeing addresses harm exposure, self-censorship, help-seeking, and emotional experiences online.

Part IV: Ecosystem explores parental mediation, youth digital culture, and platform design implications.

Operational Definitions

This chapter establishes clear definitions for the key concepts used throughout this report. When researchers, policymakers, parents, and young people discuss online safety, they often use similar words to mean different things. A parent's understanding of "cyberbullying" may differ from a platform's definition, which may differ again from how a 14-year-old experiences and describes it.

These operational definitions are produced here to ensure that readers interpret findings consistently and that the evidence presented here can inform concrete action.

Harm Types

Understanding what young people mean when they report negative online experiences requires precise definitions. The following categories structure the safety findings presented in Part III of this report.

Unwanted contact from known persons refers to receiving unsolicited messages, images, or communications from individuals the respondent knows personally, including friends, acquaintances, classmates, romantic interests, or family members, where such contact made them uncomfortable or was unwelcome. This category explicitly distinguishes from stranger-initiated contact to highlight intra-network risks. The distinction matters because much online safety discourse focuses on "stranger danger" while underrepresenting risks that emerge within trusted relationships. A classmate sending inappropriate messages, an ex-partner sharing private conversations, or a family member making uncomfortable requests all fall within this category.

Unwanted contact from strangers refers to receiving unsolicited messages, images, or communications from individuals unknown to the respondent. This includes contact attempts through social media direct messages, gaming environments, dating applications, or messaging platforms. The key characteristic is that the initiator has no prior relationship with the respondent. Examples include unsolicited romantic messages from unknown accounts, requests for personal information from strangers, or inappropriate images sent without consent.

Disturbing content refers to exposure to material that is violent, sexual, hateful, or otherwise upsetting that the respondent encountered without actively seeking it out. This includes content surfaced through algorithmic recommendations, content shared by contacts, or material encountered while browsing. The critical element is passive exposure rather than deliberate seeking. A young person scrolling through Instagram who encounters graphic violence in their feed, or one who receives disturbing images in a group chat without warning, would fall into this category. This definition excludes content that users deliberately searched for.

Photo misuse refers to having one's photograph shared, edited, or used without consent in ways that cause discomfort. This encompasses several distinct phenomena: non-consensual sharing of images (forwarding photos to people the subject did not intend to see them), image manipulation (editing photos in ways the subject did not authorise, including deepfakes and morphed images), and contextual misuse (using images in settings the subject finds inappropriate, such as creating fake profiles). This category has become increasingly relevant with the rise of AI-generated synthetic media.

Bullying and harassment refers to direct targeting through repeated negative interactions, including offensive comments, social exclusion, public humiliation, or coordinated attacks. This category includes both direct victimization and witnessed incidents affecting others. The survey asked about experiences with "harmful online behavior including bullying, gambling, or self-harm content," recognising that conduct risks often cluster together. Unlike single negative interactions, bullying implies a pattern of behaviour that creates an ongoing sense of threat or distress.

Scams and fraud refers to exposure to or victimization by deceptive practices designed to extract money, personal information, or other resources. This includes phishing attempts (fake messages designed to steal login credentials), fraudulent offers (fake giveaways, job scams, or romance scams), and manipulative schemes (pyramid schemes, cryptocurrency fraud, or fake charities). Young people increasingly encounter such schemes as they engage in online commerce and financial services.

Platform Literacy

Platform literacy refers to the ability to navigate, understand, and effectively use platform features, particularly those related to safety and privacy. This concept goes beyond basic digital literacy (knowing how to use a device) to include understanding how individual platforms function, such as how to post, communicate, and manage privacy on different apps or websites.

Effective use indicates the ability to successfully employ platform safety tools such as blocking unwanted contacts, reporting harmful content, filtering message requests, or adjusting privacy settings. A respondent with effective use can take action when they encounter problems.

Awareness gap refers to lack of knowledge that safety tools exist. A respondent who does not know Instagram has a "restrict" feature has an awareness gap; one who knows the feature exists but cannot find it has a usability gap.

Reporting fatigue describes the belief that individual reports have no meaningful impact, leading to non-use of available tools. Research on content moderation suggests that when users perceive reporting as futile, they disengage from platform safety systems even when they encounter harmful content.

Screen Time Categories

Screen time categories reflect daily phone use as reported by respondents:

Light use means less than 1 hour daily. This category is most common among the youngest respondents and those with restricted device access.

Moderate use means 1 to 3 hours daily. This represents the median range for younger adolescents.

Substantial use means 3 to 6 hours daily. This is the modal category overall, representing the largest share of respondents.

Heavy use means 6 to 12 hours daily. This category raises questions about displacement of other activities and potential wellbeing impacts.

Intensive use means more than 12 hours daily. This rare category (4.9% of respondents) may include respondents for whom phones serve multiple functions including work or education.

Parental Mediation Styles

2.4

Following established frameworks in the research literature (Kirwil, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2019), we distinguish four approaches to parental engagement with children's internet use:

Restrictive mediation encompasses approaches that limit access through outright bans on certain content or platforms, blocked websites or applications, or restricted usage time. This approach prioritises protection through limitation.

Active or instructive mediation encompasses approaches that engage through conversation about online experiences, risks, and opportunities. Rather than simply limiting access, this approach aims to build young people's capacity to navigate digital environments safely.

Monitoring encompasses approaches that track online activity without necessarily restricting it. This includes checking browser history, reviewing messages, or following children's social media accounts.

Technical controls encompass the use of parental control software, platform-specific family settings, or device-level restrictions. Unlike behavioural monitoring, these are automated technical measures.

Research suggests that active mediation combined with age-appropriate autonomy tends to produce better outcomes than purely restrictive approaches, which may reduce disclosure and drive activity toward less supervised spaces (Wisniewski et al., 2017).1.

Demographic Categories

The survey collected demographic information across several dimensions. We preserve original survey categories rather than collapsing them, as different age groups and locations show distinct patterns.

Age groups follow six categories designed to capture developmentally meaningful distinctions:

Ages 11 to 13 years represent early adolescence, typically corresponding to middle school. This group is often the newest to social media and may have the most restricted device access. Ages 14 to 16 years represent mid-adolescence, typically corresponding to high school. This group shows expanding social networks and increasing digital independence. Ages 17 to 18 years represent late adolescence and the transition to adulthood, often corresponding to final school years or early college. This group shows peak rates of certain risks in our data. Ages 19 to 21 years represent emerging adulthood, typically corresponding to undergraduate years or early workforce entry. Parental oversight typically declines substantially. Ages 22 to 25 years represent young adulthood, typically corresponding to advanced education or early career. This group shows high rates of device ownership and independent digital life. Ages 25 to 30 years represent established young adulthood, with generally stable digital patterns and established habits.

Area types follow three categories:

Metro includes state capitals and India's largest cities: Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Jaipur, Pune, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, and Surat. These areas typically have the strongest digital infrastructure and highest exposure to global platform cultures.

Other cities and towns include other cities and towns outside the metro category. These areas represent intermediate connectivity and a mix of urban and semi-urban characteristics.

Rural includes villages and rural areas. Despite significant expansion of mobile connectivity, these areas often show different patterns of device access, platform use, and digital literacy.

Gender follows categories as reported by respondents: Male, Female, Non-binary, Transgender, Prefer not to say, and Other. Sample sizes for non-binary and transgender respondents are small, limiting statistical analysis for these groups, but their inclusion reflects the survey's commitment to capturing diverse experiences.

Statistical Terms

All percentages in this report are weighted estimates unless explicitly noted otherwise. Understanding what this means helps readers interpret findings accurately.

Weighted estimates In surveys, some groups of people may end up being over-represented or under-represented among respondents. Weighted estimates adjust the results to correct for this, so the findings more closely reflect the characteristics of the wider population the survey is meant to represent. This means that responses from certain groups may be given slightly more or less influence in the final percentages, depending on how common those groups are in the overall population. Doing this helps ensure that the results are fairer and more accurate, and not unduly shaped by who happened to respond more frequently. All percentages in this report use these adjustments unless stated otherwise.

Design effect

In surveys that use weighting or complex sampling methods, the results can be more variable than they would be in a simple random survey where everyone has an equal chance of being selected. The design effect is a way of showing how much extra variability is introduced because of these adjustments.

A design effect of 4.21 means that the estimates from this survey vary more than they would in a simple random sample of the same size. In practical terms, this tells us that although we collected many responses, the precision of the results is lower than what the raw number of respondents alone might suggest.

Effective sample size

Because weighting and other survey adjustments affect how much information each response contributes, the true statistical strength of the survey can be smaller than the total number of responses collected. The effective sample size translates the survey into an equivalent simple random sample that would give a similar level of precision.

In this survey, the effective sample size is 928. This means that even though 3,907 people responded, the accuracy of the percentages reported is similar to what we would expect from a simple random survey of about 928 respondents.

Introduction

India is home to the world's largest youth population. With approximately 600 million people under the age of 25 and over 80% of the young population (15-24 years) having access to the internet (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024), the country represents a unique intersection of demographic scale and digital transformation. Understanding how young Indians experience online environments has become essential not only for domestic policy and platform design, but for global conversations about youth digital safety. What happens in India's digital spaces will shape patterns that emerge worldwide.

Yet for all the attention paid to India's digital growth, relatively little systematic research has examined how young people themselves navigate this landscape. Most discussions of youth online safety draw on data from North America and Western Europe, contexts with different platform ecosystems, regulatory environments, and cultural norms around technology use. This report addresses that gap directly, presenting findings from a large-scale survey of nearly 4,000 young Indians about their digital lives, their experiences of harm and safety, and their strategies for managing online environments.

The Indian Digital Landscape 3.1

The transformation of Indian digital infrastructure over the past decade has been remarkable. Government initiatives under Digital India, coupled with dramatic reductions in mobile data costs have democratised internet access in ways few predicted. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), data costs fell from among the highest in the world to among the lowest within just two years, triggering what analysts describe as a "data revolution" in consumption patterns.

Rural India is undergoing significant change as more young people embrace technology. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 documented that among those aged 15 to 24 in rural areas, 82.1% can now access the internet, though gaps with urban areas (91.8%) persist (ASER Centre, 2024). Mobile phones have become the primary gateway to digital life: the same report found that 95.7% of rural youth aged 15 to 24 can use a mobile phone, with smartphones increasingly common even in villages.

The platform ecosystem young Indians inhabit also differs from Western contexts. While global platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp dominate, their usage patterns reflect local social dynamics. WhatsApp serves not just as a messaging application but as a primary news source, family coordination tool, and commercial platform. Instagram's visual culture intersects with Indian norms around appearance, gender, and self-presentation. Mobile battle-royale games such as PUBG Mobile and Free Fire have not only driven the exponential growth of mobile gaming communities in India but have become significant cultural phenomena with localized social dynamics around play, esports, identity, and risk perception (Sharma, 2025; Techstory, 2025). Indian research on gaming addiction highlights patterns of behavioural distress and associated adversities within these communities, suggesting that the risks observed in India may differ in form and scale from those documented in Western samples (Kar, 2023).

Building On Prior Research 3.2

This report emerges from a sustained engagement with questions of youth digital safety in India and builds on YLAC's earlier research conducted through the Digital Champions Program, which engaged over 10,000 students over two years and culminated in the Children's Digital Future Roundtable in December 2023. That earlier work highlighted several patterns that informed the current study: over 77% of respondents reported shared device access, typically using phones belonging to parents or siblings rather than personal devices. Parents expressed significant concern about children's exposure to inappropriate content and distraction from studies. The SCREEN (Student Cyber Resilience Education and Empowerment Nationwide) survey builds on these insights while expanding scope and methodological rigour. SCREEN offers systematic examination across a broader age range (11 to 30 years) and more states (20) to ensure findings speak to the broader landscape of Indian youth rather than only survey participants. It examines the social and contextual enablers that shape device access, maps how young people use and engage with social media platforms, assesses their awareness of available grievance and recourse mechanisms, and identifies the key sources of support they rely on within the broader digital safety ecosystem.

Theoretical Frameworks 3.3

Several theoretical perspectives inform how we interpret the patterns documented in this report. Rather than adopting a single framework, we draw on complementary approaches that illuminate different aspects of youth digital experience.

The 4cs Framework For Online Risks   3.3.1

Livingstone and colleagues developed a framework categorising online risks into four domains: Content (exposure to harmful material), Contact (dangerous interactions), Conduct (problematic behaviour by or toward the young person), and Contract (commercial exploitation) (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). This framework structures our analysis of harm exposure in Part III. Importantly, the 4Cs framework recognises that young people are not merely passive victims of online risks but active participants who may both experience and perpetrate problematic behaviours. The framework also emphasises that risk does not equal harm: exposure to potentially risky content or contact does not automatically produce negative outcomes, as individual resilience, contextual factors, and available support systems mediate the relationship between exposure and impact.

Digital Divide And Digital Inequality   3.3.2

Understanding digital access requires moving beyond binary connected/unconnected framings. Hargittai's influential work on digital inequality emphasises that disparities in skills, resources, and outcomes persist even after basic access barriers fall (Hargittai, 2020). First-level digital divides (who have access) have given way to second-level divides (who can use technology effectively) and third-level divides (who benefits from technology use). In the Indian context, Gangotia and colleagues documented that while the Digital India initiative has increased rural technology adoption, significant gaps remain in converting access into opportunity (Sindakis & Showkat, 2024). Our findings on platform literacy gaps, where 21% of respondents are unaware that reporting and moderation tools exist, reflect these second-level inequalities.

Impression Management And Performative Authenticity   3.3.3

Young people's online self-presentation exists in tension between authenticity and performance. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework, developed long before social media existed, conceptualised social life as involving "frontstage" performances for audiences and "backstage" spaces where people can relax their presentations

(Goffman, 1949). Applied to digital contexts by scholars like Marwick and boyd, this framework helps explain the self-censorship patterns documented in this report (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). When 90% of young people report holding something back online, they are engaging in strategic impression management, navigating what researchers call "context collapse," the phenomenon where multiple audiences (friends, family, teachers, future employers) converge in single digital spaces.

Recent research on platforms like BeReal suggests young people increasingly desire spaces that prioritise authenticity over curated performance (Tirocchi, 2024). The fatigue with performative social media culture documented in our data, where support for "reduction of fake personas" emerges as a design preference, aligns with this authenticity turn. Young people recognise the costs of constant curation even as they participate in it.

Gendered Patterns In Digital Experience And Help-Seeking

3.3.4

Gender shapes digital experience in ways that require explicit attention. Our data show that females experience higher rates of unwanted contact, engage in more self-censorship around visual content, and demonstrate different help-seeking patterns than males. These patterns connect to broader research on gendered harassment, where women face more appearance-based scrutiny and sexually oriented unwanted attention in digital spaces (Williams, 2016).

The finding that males are more likely to tell no one about negative online experiences connects to research on masculinity and help-seeking. Lynch and colleagues found that young men prioritise male group membership in personal decision-making, with help-seeking viewed as threatening masculine identity (Lynch et al., 2018). The WHO's synthesis on masculinity and mental health reported that fear of being judged and shamed for transgressing masculine ideals are common stigmatising experiences that discourage men from seeking support (Gough & Novikova, 2020). When we observe that 10.9% of males tell no one about negative experiences compared with 8.6% of females, we are seeing the digital manifestation of broader patterns documented in mental health research. This may reflect internalised norms around self-reliance, concern about being perceived as weak, or lack of trusted support figures. Understanding these gendered dynamics is essential for designing interventions that reach young people across the gender spectrum.

Research Questions and Report Structure

This research addresses several interconnected questions that emerged from prior work and gaps in existing literature:

Access and infrastructure: What forms does device access take in young people's lives, and how do ownership, ease of access, timing and purpose of first phone use, and institutional restrictions (such as school or college policies) shape their ability to meaningfully engage with the digital world?

Platform ecosystems: Which platforms constitute the digital ecosystem of Indian youth, and how do young people distribute their social interactions across apps, accounts, and audiences? Examining platform choice, multi-account use, and audience management sheds light on how young people actively navigate visibility, privacy, and context in networked spaces.

Usage patterns: What are the patterns of screen time, and is digital engagement woven into daily routines such as waking up and late-night use? Understanding the timing and intensity of use provides critical context for interpreting experiences related to attention, wellbeing, and online risk.

Safety experiences: What harms do young people encounter online, and from whom - strangers, known individuals, or platform environments themselves? Distinguishing between different forms and origins of harm challenges simplified narratives of online risk and informs more targeted prevention strategies.

Response and coping: What do young people hold back online, and why? Where do they turn when things go wrong? Self-censorship and help-seeking patterns reveal both the costs of navigating digital spaces and the resources young people draw upon.

Support ecosystems: What forms of support surround young people's online lives, and how effective are they in practice? This includes parental mediation, peer support, educational inputs, platform tools, and formal reporting mechanisms, as well as young people's awareness of and trust in these systems.

Device Access

Understanding digital safety begins with understanding digital access. Before examining what young people experience online, we must first establish who has access to what devices, under what conditions, and with what constraints.

The findings in this chapter highlight that while smartphone access is widespread, individuals are not always the primary owners of the devices they use. This distinction between having access to a device and having unrestricted personal use is particularly important from a gendered perspective. Even when women have the option to use a device, their use is often limited by unpaid labour, household responsibilities, and societal norms, especially in rural areas, which can restrict their ability to engage freely with the internet (Barboni et al., 2024). Many young people, particularly teenagers, navigate digital life through shared family devices or under significant restrictions. As a result, the context in which people use digital devices here in India differs significantly from the Western model, which typically assumes that each individual owns and controls their own device.

Overall Access Patterns 4.1

Device Access Among Young Indians   % reporting access to device (N = 3,907)
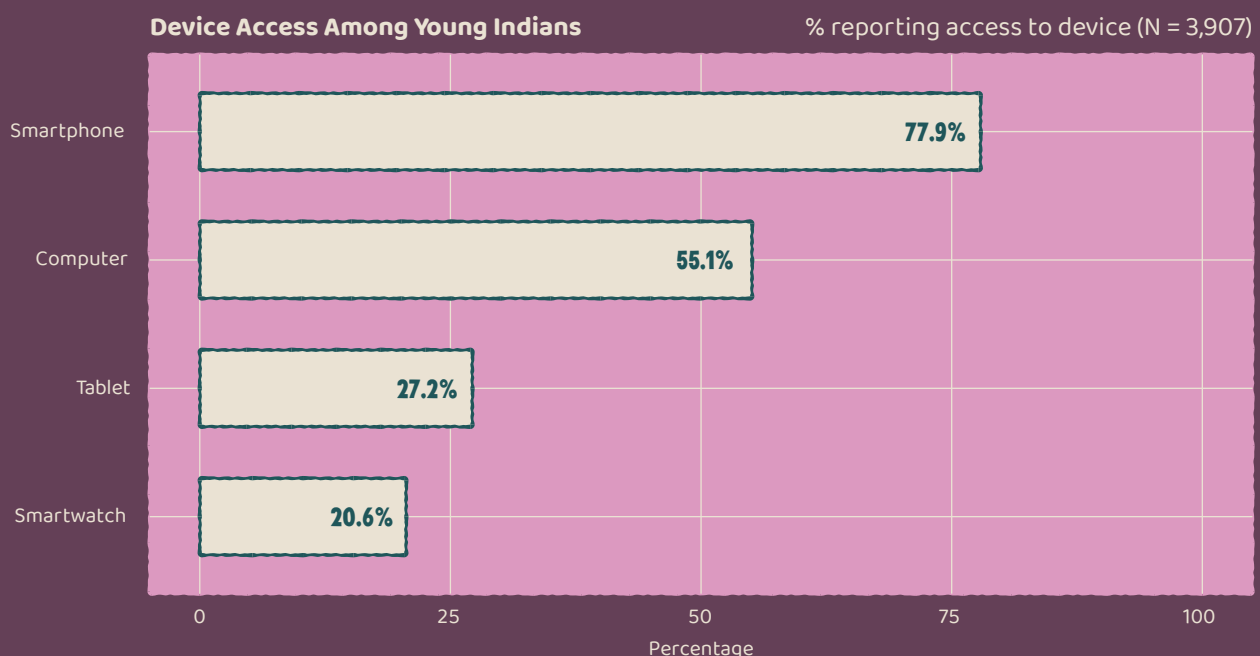
¹ The question asked was: Do you have access to any of the following digital devices at home, school, college, or workplace? This was asked for each of these: computer or laptop; smartphone; tablet; smartwatch or fitness band. Please refer to the Appendices section for the questionnaire.

Smartphone access is substantially higher than computer access, with 77.9 percent of people using smartphones compared to 55.1 percent using computers, reflecting the mobile-first nature of digitalisation in India. Tablets (27.2 percent) and smartwatches (20.6 percent) remain less common, with smartwatch access particularly low in rural areas at 10.4 percent compared to 28.0 percent in metropolitan regions. This device hierarchy matters because it shapes the platforms young people use, the content they can create, and the safety features they encounter. Mobile interfaces prioritise brevity and visual content, while computer access enables different activities: longer-form content creation, certain educational platforms, professional skill development, and more sophisticated privacy management.

The Age Gradient In Smartphone Access 4.2

Smartphone access generally rises with age, though not in a strictly linear way. About 65.0 percent of respondents aged 11–13 report having a smartphone, increasing to 73.5 percent among those aged 14–16. Access dips slightly to 66.8 percent for the 17–18 age group, before rising sharply to 83.5 percent among those aged 19–21. It peaks at 85.3 percent for ages 22–25 and then stabilises at 81.7 percent among those aged 25–30. The pronounced jump in early adulthood likely reflects college entry, greater independence from parental oversight, and, for some, access to income.

While access to smartphones becomes common by mid-adolescence, unrestricted personal phone use grows more gradually. Only 12.7 percent of those aged 11–13 report unrestricted access, rising to 28.9 percent among 14–16-year-olds and further to 40.5 percent among those aged 17–18. This pattern points to a steady expansion of digital autonomy with age, shaped not only by device ownership but also by shifting norms of control and independence.

Gender Patterns: Access Versus Autonomy 4.3

In our survey, female respondents report slightly higher smartphone access (80.5%) than males (76.7%). However, this includes having access to a shared phone. This finding diverges from traditional digital divide narratives that assume male advantage in technology access across India.However, access alone does not capture quality of engagement, and the gender story becomes more complex when we examine autonomy over devices. Males (61.0%) are substantially more likely than females (53.4%) to have unrestricted personal phone access. This gap likely reflects gendered parental monitoring practices. Research on parental mediation in other cultural contexts has documented that families often exercise more oversight over daughters' digital activities than sons' (Kirwil, 2009). In the Indian context, concerns about daughters' online interactions, particularly with unknown males, may translate into more restricted or supervised access. The implications ripple through later chapters: if females have less private access to devices, they may have fewer opportunities to seek help for negative experiences without family awareness, potentially explaining some of the gendered help-seeking patterns we document.

The Urban-Rural Divide: Computers, Not Phones 4.4

For smartphones, location differences are minimal and statistically unremarkable: 75.7% access in metros, 79.8% in towns, and 78.5% in rural areas. Computer access tells a different story entirely. In metros, 72.5% report computer access. This drops to 53.1% in towns and falls to just 36.5% in rural areas. The 36-percentage-point gap between metros and rural areas represents a substantively meaningful divide with implications extending well beyond digital safety. Computer access enables participation in certain educational platforms that do not translate well to mobile interfaces. It supports professional skill development in areas like programming, design, and data analysis. It allows longer-form content creation that smartphone keyboards and screens make difficult.

Evidence from qualitative research on urban–rural digital differences suggests that while many rural schools continue to operate with basic facilities and little exposure to digital tools, better-resourced urban institutions integrate online platforms and technology into everyday learning (Laskar, 2023). As a result, young people growing up in rural areas or under-resourced urban neighbourhoods face disadvantages, including limited opportunities to build digital skills and translate connectivity into educational or economic mobility. 4.5 From Access to Accessibility: The Critical Distinction

Device availability does not equal device accessibility in daily life. The survey distinguished several levels of phone access that reveal the texture of young people's digital engagement.

Only 56.5% of respondents report having their own phone that they can use whenever they want. An additional 13.3% have personal phones but cannot take them to school or college. Over one-fifth (21.5%) do not have personal phones at all and instead use shared family devices, typically limited to a few hours each day. A smaller group (5.7%) reports rare access to phones, while 2.5% report no phone access whatsoever.

Shared Device Dynamics: Opportunity and Risk 4.5.1

The prevalence of shared family devices (21.5% overall) creates distinctive dynamics that merit extended discussion. Shared access presents both opportunities and risks that differ from the individual ownership model.

On the opportunity side, shared devices create natural touchpoints for family conversation about digital experiences. When a parent and child use the same phone, the parent may observe browsing patterns, notice application downloads, or encounter content that prompts discussion.

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On the opportunity side, shared devices create natural touchpoints for family conversation about digital experiences. When a parent and child use the same phone, the parent may observe browsing patterns, notice application downloads, or encounter content that prompts discussion.
This passive awareness differs from active monitoring and may feel less invasive to young people while still providing parents with insight into their children's digital lives.

On the risk side, shared devices can expose young people to age-inappropriate content. A phone primarily used by an adult may contain content, applications, or communications unsuitable for younger users. When devices pass between family members without careful management, a teenager may encounter material intended for adult eyes. Additionally, shared access creates privacy constraints: young people

Accessibility by Age (4.5.2)

The accessibility gradient is steep and reflects developmental progression toward independence. Among respondents aged 11 to 13, only 12.7% have unrestricted personal phones. This rises to 28.9% among those aged 14 to 16, then to 40.5% for those aged 17 to 18. The sharpest increase occurs between late adolescence and emerging adulthood: 66.4% of those aged 19 to 21 have unrestricted personal phones, rising to more than 75% among those in higher age groups.

These patterns reflect the vastly different online experiences of individuals who are clubbed as 'teenagers'. Policymakers and platforms need to think about these nuanced differences while designing interventions.

Regional Variation in Accessibility (4.5.3)

Regional patterns in device accessibility prove remarkably varied. In Southern India, 85.3% of respondents report having their own phone that they can use when they want. This drops to 77.3% in Eastern India, 53.4% in Western India, 46.3% in Central India, 30.7% in the Northeast, and just 26.5% in Northern India.

These regional differences may reflect varying economic conditions, cultural norms around technology provision for youth, and different patterns of urbanisation. The three-fold difference between Southern India (85.3%) and Northern India (26.5%) in unrestricted phone access is striking and suggests that regional context significantly shapes young people's digital autonomy.

Age at Which Young People Receive their First Smartphone 4.6

Young people tend to receive their first smartphone during late adolescence. The most common age range for first smartphone access is 17–18 years, accounting for 28.2 percent of respondents who own a phone. This is followed by access between the ages of 14 and 16 (20.5 percent) and 19 and 21 years (16.8 percent). Notably, 12.4 percent of respondents reported receiving their first phone between the ages of 11 and 13, while a smaller proportion (3.6 percent) accessed a smartphone of their own before the age of 11.

Education emerged as the most common reason for young people receiving their first smartphone, with 26.9 percent of respondents reporting that they received a phone 'for studies.' This underscores the role of smartphones in accessing educational content, coordinating with teachers and classmates, and completing school-related tasks. . Safety and family communication followed at 18.8%, with parents providing phones to stay in contact with children and ensure their safety. Only 5.4% explicitly cited peer pressure ("because everyone else had one"), though this figure likely underestimates social influence given desirability concerns in self-report.

Gender patterns in smartphone access show that males tend to receive their first smartphones earlier than females.Among males, 31.9% received their first smartphone at ages 17 to 18 compared with 24.6% of females. At ages 14 to 16, 23.9% of males versus 17.2% of females received their first phones. Conversely, females are more likely to receive phones at older ages (19.1% at ages 19 to 21 versus 14.8% for males). These patterns align with the broader finding that families may exercise more caution around daughters' digital access.

School Phone Policies: The Indian Context 4.7

Phone policies in Indian educational institutions present a distinctive pattern that differs substantially from many Western contexts. In much of Europe and North America, debates have centred on whether to restrict phone use during class time. In India, outright bans on carrying phones in schools are more common, though enforcement varies considerably.

Among respondents currently enrolled in schools or colleges, 36.9 percent report that smartphones are allowed on campus. In contrast, 19.4 percent indicate that smartphones are banned and that the ban is effectively enforced, while 16.1 percent report that phones are officially banned but students continue to bring them. An additional 20.6 percent report limited allowance, with phones permitted only during special events or specific days.

Regional variation in school phone policies is substantial. In Northeastern India, 58.6% of respondents report phones are allowed, the highest regional rate. Southern India follows at 54.7%. In contrast, only 14.2% of respondents in Central India report phones are allowed, with Northern India at 20.9%. These differences may reflect varying educational philosophies, different perceptions of phones as distractions versus learning tools, and regional patterns of institutional strictness.

The urban-rural pattern in school phone policies shows that rural schools are more likely to enforce bans. In rural areas, 19.7% report enforced phone bans compared with 12.9% in metros.

Implications 4.8

The device access landscape reveals a mobile-first, increasingly connected youth population with significant variation in how access translates to daily life. Several implications follow from these patterns.

For Platforms 4.8.1

Design for mobile-first contexts while ensuring key safety features translate effectively to small screens and touch interfaces. The 77.9% smartphone access rate means mobile interfaces are the primary point of contact for the vast majority of young Indian users. Safety features that work well on desktop but poorly on mobile effectively exclude most young Indians.

For Policymakers 4.8.2

The computer access divide (72.5% metro versus 36.5% rural) represents a capability gap with educational and economic implications extending beyond digital safety. Infrastructure investments should address this divide alongside connectivity, recognising that smartphones and computers enable different types of digital participation. Additionally, school phone policy represents an opportunity for clear guidance. The current patchwork of enforced bans, unenforced bans, and open policies creates confusion. Evidence-based guidance on age-appropriate phone integration in education could help schools navigate this complex terrain.

For Parents and Educators

Recognising that 21.5% of young people share family devices highlights the importance of household conversations about digital experiences. Shared access creates supervision opportunities that personal device ownership forecloses: parents who share devices with children have natural moments to observe and discuss digital life. However, it is also important for parents to educate themselves on app settings that can enable age appropriate experiences for children on shared devices.

Platform Usage

This chapter maps the platform ecosystem that young Indians inhabit, examining which services they use, how they communicate with peers, and how they manage the complexity of presenting themselves to multiple audiences across digital spaces.

The Platform Ecosystem

Platform Adoption Among Young Indians   % with account on each platform (N = 3,907)

Platform	Percentage
Instagram	61.8%
YouTube	53.1%
Facebook	44.1%
ChatGPT	38.8%
Snapchat	35.3%
LinkedIn	30.8%
Twitter/X	26.9%
Signal/Discord/Telegram	20.5%
Reddit	13%
Gaming	10.3%
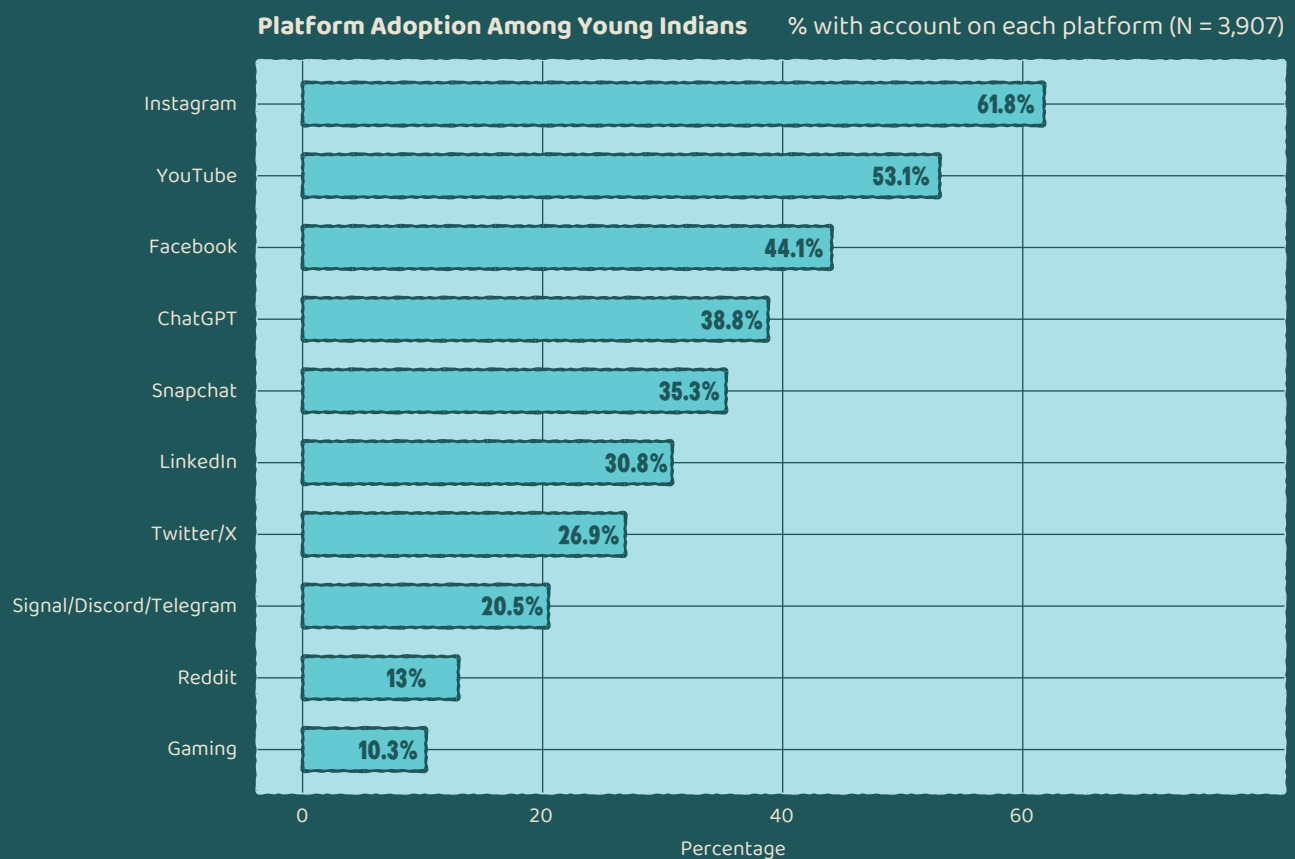
Overall, Instagram leads platform adoption at 61.8%, followed by YouTube at 53.1% and Facebook at 44.1%. The generative AI platform ChatGPT has achieved remarkably rapid penetration at 38.8%. Snapchat's adoption stands at 35.3% and LinkedIn at 30.8%. Twitter, now rebranded as X, reaches 26.9% of respondents. Privacy-oriented messaging platforms including Signal, Discord, and Telegram collectively reach 20.5%, while Reddit captures 13.0%. Gaming platforms including Roblox, PUBG Mobile, and Free Fire reach 10.3% of respondents.

This hierarchy reveals several dynamics worth exploring in depth.

Visual-First Dominance

The visual dominance shapes content consumption patterns. Algorithmic feeds on the two most commonly used platforms, Instagram and YouTube have shifted toward short-form video content, exemplified by Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, creating distinct consumption rhythms: rapid scrolling through brief clips.

This visual emphasis shapes how young people present themselves online, how they consume content, and how they form impressions of others. Research on adolescent social media use has documented that visual platforms create particular pressures around appearance, body image, and curated self-presentation (Chua & Chang, 2016). When the primary mode of online expression is photographic and video-based, young people invest considerable effort in how they look, what backgrounds appear in their images, and how their lives appear when captured visually.

The Velocity of AI Adoption

Use of ChatGPT is present across age groups, though it is unevenly distributed. Overall, 849 respondents report having a ChatGPT account. Uptake is highest among those aged 11–13 (33.0%) and 25–30 (31.0%), with lower reported use among mid-adolescent groups, particularly those aged 17–18 (9.8%). Respondents aged 19–21 (20.6%) and 22–25 (22.2%) fall in between. These patterns suggest that exposure to and use of generative AI tools does not follow a simple age gradient and may be shaped by a mix of curiosity, educational context, and access rather than age alone.

Facebook's Persistence in India

Despite global narratives of Facebook decline among youth, the platform's 44.1% adoption rate suggests continued relevance in the Indian context. This persistence may reflect several factors. Facebook remains important for family connectivity, as older relatives who adopted social media through Facebook continue to use it. Regional platform preferences may also play a role: in some Indian states and language communities, Facebook groups and pages serve as primary spaces for local news, community organisation, and marketplace transactions that have not fully migrated to other platforms.

Professional Platform Engagement

LinkedIn adoption reveals a striking developmental pattern. While overall adoption stands at 20.8%, usage rises sharply from just 1.8% among 11-13 year-olds to 11.3% among 14-16 year-olds, a sixfold increase suggesting professional identity formation begins earlier than traditional career timelines would suggest. By ages 17-18, 14.4% maintain LinkedIn profiles, rising to 23.3% at 19-21 and peaking at 32.8% among 25-30 year-olds.

The presence of over one in ten 14-16 year-olds on a professional networking platform reflects India's intensely competitive education-to-employment pipeline, where building credentials and networks begins well before workforce entry. These teenagers, years away from formal employment, are already constructing professional digital identities, whether prompted by parental guidance, school counselling, or peer influence.

Communication Channels: WhatsApp's Central Role

When respondents were asked which platforms they use to chat with friends, WhatsApp clearly emerges as the backbone of everyday communication. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.9%) report using WhatsApp while 39.3% use WhatsApp as the sole platform for communication, making it by far the most widely used messaging platform. Instagram Direct Message is the second most common channel, used by 36.3% of respondents, often alongside WhatsApp rather than as a standalone alternative. Other platforms such as Facebook Messenger (10.4%) and Twitter/X (3.4%) play a much smaller role in routine peer communication.

More privacy-oriented or niche platforms including Signal, Discord, and Telegram are used by only 3.5% of respondents. While limited in overall reach, these platforms may still serve specific functions such as coordinating groups, gaming communities, or issue-based conversations rather than everyday social chatting.

Urban-Rural Differences in Communication Patterns

The urban-rural divide in communication platform usage proves particularly striking. In rural areas, 54.0% use WhatsApp alone as their chat platform, compared with 31.1% in metros. Conversely, the combination of WhatsApp and Instagram Direct Message is used by 29.2% of metro respondents but only 5.0% of rural respondents. This pattern suggests that rural youth rely more heavily on a single platform ecosystem while urban youth layer multiple platforms for different communication contexts.

The complexity of digital life creates substantial audience management challenges. Young people must navigate presentations for friends, family, professional contacts, teachers, and public viewers, often encountering these different audiences across the same platforms or even within single posts.

Account Management Strategies

More than half of survey respondents (50.6%) report using some form of audience management to navigate their online interactions, indicating that young people actively make strategic decisions about how they present themselves across digital spaces. Rather than engaging in uniform or unreflective sharing, many respondents demonstrate an awareness of audience boundaries and use a range of tools and practices to manage visibility, relationships, and context.

These strategies vary in complexity. Platform differentiation is employed by 15.1% of respondents, who use different applications for different groups. A common pattern involves using WhatsApp for family communication, Instagram for friends, and platforms like Discord for gaming communities. This approach leverages platform architecture to maintain separation without requiring multiple accounts on any single platform.

Privacy settings within platforms are used by 15.0%, who maintain one account per application but change settings to control who can see what content. Instagram's "Close Friends" feature for stories, the ability to hide stories from specific followers, and post-by-post audience selection all enable this approach. Users can share different content with different audience segments while maintaining a single account identity.

Multiple accounts per platform are maintained by 6.1%, who create parallel presences on the same application to separate audiences. The phenomenon of "Finsta" (fake Instagram, typically a private account for close friends) versus "Rinsta" (real Instagram, the public-facing main account) exemplifies this approach. A young person might maintain a polished public Instagram presence for family and acquaintances while sharing more candid content with close friends on a separate private account.

7.1% combine multiple strategies across platforms, reflecting layered and adaptive approaches to audience control while 7.3% report uncertainty about their own approach.

At the same time, nearly half of respondents (49.4%) maintain a single, unified online presence across audiences.. Several factors may explain this pattern. Managing multiple accounts and carefully segmenting content is cognitively taxing.

Performative Culture and Authenticity Fatigue 5.4

The finding that young people actively manage multiple audiences connects to broader discussions about authenticity and performance on social media. Research has documented what scholars term "performative exhaustion," the fatigue that comes from constantly maintaining curated online presences (Pooley, 2021). The effort of selecting flattering photos, crafting witty captions, timing posts for maximum engagement, and monitoring responses creates ongoing labour that can feel draining rather than connective.

Young consumers are becoming fatigued by the negative effects of self-presentation on many social networking sites, driving interest in platforms that enable more authentic modes of being and interaction (Tirocchi, 2024). The emergence of platforms like BeReal, which prompts users to share unfiltered photos at random times rather than allowing unlimited curation, reflects this appetite for authenticity.

Platform Multitasking and Its Cognitive Demands 5.5

The fragmented platform landscape means that young people simultaneously maintain presences across multiple services, each with distinct norms, interfaces, and social dynamics. This creates several challenges worth examining.

The cognitive load of managing notifications, remembering platform-specific norms, and maintaining relationships across services demands ongoing attention. A message on WhatsApp requires different response expectations than a comment on Instagram; a post on LinkedIn follows different conventions than a tweet. Young people must continuously code-switch between these contexts, adjusting tone, content, and timing based on platform.

Different platforms carry different risk profiles that users must navigate. Messaging applications like WhatsApp create contact-based risks where unwanted communication can be difficult to prevent once phone numbers are shared. Algorithmic feed platforms like Instagram and YouTube create content-based risks

where disturbing material may surface through recommendations. Platforms with aggressive monetisation create commercial risks through scams, fraudulent advertising, and manipulative marketing. Gaming platforms create their own distinctive risk environment involving in-game purchases, competitive toxicity, and contact with unknown players.

Safety features differ substantially across platforms, and proficiency on one does not transfer automatically to another. A young person who knows how to block and report on Instagram may not know the equivalent functions on WhatsApp or Discord. The platform literacy gaps documented in earlier chapters compound across the multiple platforms young people use: if only 37.1% can effectively use moderation tools, and different platforms have different tools, the actual competency for any given platform may be even lower.

Implications   5.6

The platform ecosystem findings have implications for multiple stakeholders concerned with youth digital safety.

For Platforms   5.6.1

Cross-platform consistency in safety features would benefit users navigating multiple services. When reporting mechanisms work differently on every platform, users must learn multiple systems rather than developing transferable competencies. Age verification, privacy defaults, and safety tool interfaces that aim for some degree of standardisation or interoperability would reduce the learning burden and increase the likelihood that young people can protect themselves across the platforms they use.

For Policymakers   5.6.2

Regulatory frameworks must address the platform ecosystem as a whole rather than focusing on individual services in isolation. Young people's experiences span platforms, and interventions targeting only one service may simply displace activity to other platforms without reducing overall risk.The rapid adoption of generative AI among young Indians suggests that AI-specific digital literacy should become a policy priority. Existing digital citizenship curricula may not address the distinct considerations that arise when interacting with AI systems, including the question of whether AI outputs can be trusted, how AI training data shapes outputs, and the privacy implications of AI queries.

For Parents and Educators

Digital literacy education should address multiple platforms and the specific features of each rather than generic internet safety messages that may not translate to the particular services young people use. Understanding that rural youth rely more heavily on WhatsApp while urban youth layer multiple platforms suggests that platform-specific education should be tailored to local usage patterns.

Parents seeking to understand their children's digital lives should recognise that the platform ecosystem is complex and rapidly evolving. A parent who understands Facebook may find Instagram's features unfamiliar, and both may differ substantially from the Discord servers or gaming platforms their children use.
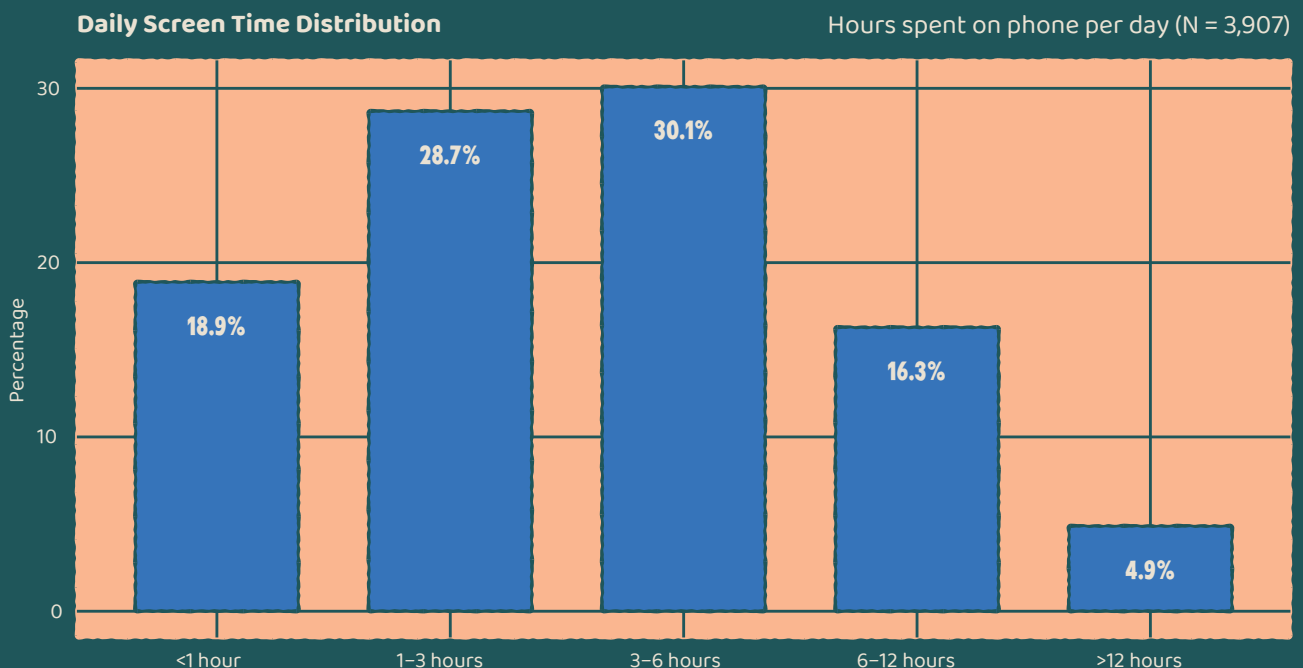
Screen Time and Digital Habits

How much time do young Indians spend on their phones, and at what point does digital engagement begin each day? This chapter examines screen time patterns and the onset of daily digital activity, and explores how these behaviours relate to emotional experiences online.The findings reveal that substantial daily screen time, habitual use of phones immediately upon waking up and emotional exhaustion cluster together in ways that merit attention from researchers, practitioners, and young people themselves.

Understanding screen time requires moving beyond simple concerns about "too much" or "too little" toward more nuanced questions about context, content, and individual experience. Research increasingly suggests that the quality of digital engagement matters more than quantitative measures such as total time spent online, frequency of use, or platform-specific metrics like likes and views, and that relationships between screen time and wellbeing are complex rather than straightforwardly negative (Valkenburg et al., 2022). With this nuance in mind, we present findings that nonetheless reveal meaningful patterns worth examining.

Daily Screen Time Distribution

Daily Screen Time Distribution

Hours spent on phone per day (N = 3,907)

- <1 hour: 18.9%
- 1–3 hours: 28.7%
- 3–6 hours: 30.1%
- 6–12 hours: 16.3%
- >12 hours: 4.9%

The largest share of respondents (30.1%) report an average daily phone use of 3 to 6 hours. This is followed by those reporting 1 to 3 hours (28.7%), less than 1 hour (18.9%), 6 to 12 hours (16.3%), and more than 12 hours (4.9%). Combining these categories reveals that nearly half (47.6%) spend less than 3 hours daily, which might be considered light to moderate use. Meanwhile, over one-fifth (21.2%) fall into heavy use categories of 6 or more hours daily.

Screen Time by Age: A Story of Expanding Digital Engagement 6.2

Screen time increases systematically with age, reflecting expanding digital autonomy and a deeper integration of phones into daily life. The pattern is clearest when examining the extremes of the distribution.

Light phone use, defined as less than one hour per day, is most prevalent among the youngest respondents. Nearly half (46.1%) of those aged 11 to 13 fall into this category, indicating limited and often supervised access to personal devices. . This drops to 22.8% among those aged 14 to 16, then to 16.0% for ages 17 to 18. There is a modest uptick to 23.5% for ages 19 to 21, before declining to 16.9% among those aged 22 to 25 and reaching the lowest rate of 14.7% among those aged 25 to 30.

The sharp decline from 46.1% (ages 11 to 13) to 14.7% (ages 25 to 30) in light phone use reflects the expanding role of digital technology across adolescence and into adulthood. The temporary increase at ages 19 to 21 may reflect transitional life circumstances such as gaps between school completion and stable employment that create more variable patterns of phone access and use.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, **heavy phone use**, six to twelve hours per day, shows a broadly inverse pattern. Only 3.4% of those aged 11 to 13 report heavy use, rising to 12.5% among those aged 14 to 16, then reaching the peak at 23.2% for ages 17 to 18. Heavy use then moderates to 20.8% for ages 19 to 21 and declines to 16.3% among those aged 22 to 25, before rising again to 19.4% among those aged 25 to 30.

The peak of heavy use during late adolescence (ages 17 to 18) likely reflects increased digital autonomy combined with academic pressures requiring online engagement and active social media participation, without the countervailing time constraints that employment and family responsibilities impose on older adults.

Screen Time by Gender: Different Patterns, Different Explanations 6.3

Clear gender differences emerge in daily screen time patterns. Males show substantially higher engagement than females across the heavier use categories. Among males, 34.7% spend 3 to 6 hours daily compared with 25.5% of females. In the heavy use category of 6 to 12 hours, 19.5% of males fall here compared with 13.0% of females. Conversely, females show higher rates of light use. Among females, 25.4% use their phones less than 1 hour daily compared with just 12.6% of males. The pattern extends across the distribution: females are consistently more likely to report lower screen time while males are consistently more likely to report higher screen time.

Several factors may contribute to these gender differences. Gendered expectations around household responsibilities may constrain female leisure time available for phone use. Research from other contexts has documented that females often face more restrictive parental oversight of digital activities, which may limit total screen time even when device access is similar (Kirwil, 2009). Platform preferences may also influence these patterns. For example, gaming, often involving longer, sustained sessions, tends to be more common among males, whereas certain social media behaviours, which are typically shorter but more frequent, tend to be more common among females.

Screen Time by Location: Regional Variation 6.4

Geographic patterns in screen time reveal meaningful variation. In metros, the distribution shows 17.2% reporting less than 1 hour, 26.9% reporting 1 to 3 hours, 32.0% reporting 3 to 6 hours, 17.6% reporting 6 to 12 hours, and 5.9% reporting more than 12 hours. Rural areas show a somewhat different pattern: 22.6% report less than 1 hour, 31.9% report 1 to 3 hours, 26.0% report 3 to 6 hours, 14.9% report 6 to 12 hours, and 3.9% report more than 12 hours.

The overall pattern shows somewhat higher screen time in metros than in rural areas, with the heaviest use categories more concentrated in urban settings. This may reflect better connectivity infrastructure enabling extended online engagement, different employment and lifestyle patterns, or greater integration of digital tools into urban daily life. However, the differences are not dramatic: rural youth engage substantially with phones even if at somewhat lower intensity than their urban peers.

When Does Your Daily Digital Life Begin

Morning Phone Habits

When do you first check your phone after waking?
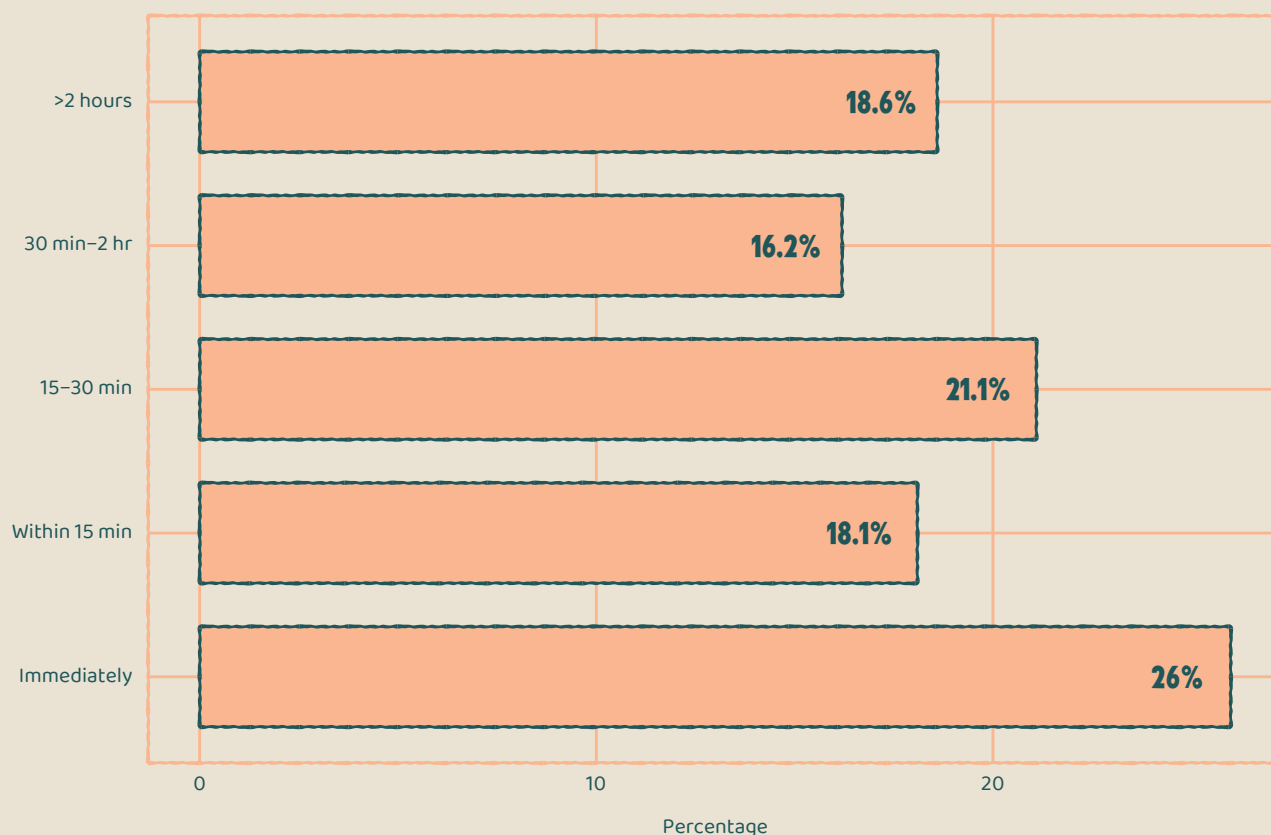
The time of the day when people first check their phones reveals distinct behavioural patterns that connect to broader questions about digital integration into daily routines. Over a quarter of respondents (26.0%) reported using their phone immediately after waking.. An additional 18.1% engage within 15 minutes of waking up, and 21.1% within 30 minutes. A smaller proportion (16.2%) waits 1 to 2 hours before using their phones for the first time in the day, while 18.6% wait more than 2 hours.

44.1% of young people check their phones within 15 minutes of waking, and 65.2% engage within 30 minutes. For nearly two-thirds of young Indians, digital life begins before most other morning activities. Smartphones become part of the transition from sleep to wakefulness, integrated into the earliest moments of the day.

When Different Ages Start Their Day Online

The tendency to check one's phone immediately upon waking up in the morning increases with age, though the pattern is not uniform. Among those aged 11 to 13, only 9.6% check phones immediately upon waking. This rises to 13.3% for ages 14 to 16, then dips slightly to 10.8% for ages 17 to 18, before climbing to 17.9% for ages 19 to 21, 29.4% for ages 22 to 25, and 28.9% for ages 25 to 30.

The tripling from youngest to oldest (9.6% to 28.9%) reflects evolving relationships with devices across the lifespan. Younger respondents, more likely under parental supervision with restricted device access, cannot simply reach for phones upon waking even if they wished to do so. By contrast, adults have often integrated phones into morning routines: checking messages, reviewing calendars, scanning news, or simply establishing contact with the digital world as part of starting the day.

Regional variation proves more pronounced. Southern India shows the highest rate of immediate phone checking upon waking (37.3%) and the lowest rate of waiting more than 2 hours (8.4%). Northeastern India shows the opposite extreme: only 11.3% check phones immediately while waiting over 2 hours is more common. These regional differences may reflect cultural variations in morning routines, different patterns of phone integration into daily life, or connectivity and access differences that shape when and how phones can be used.

Who Goes Online First: Gender Patterns in the Morning

Gender differences in phone use immediately after waking follow the broader screen time pattern but with interesting nuances. Males (28.0%) are more likely than females (24.5%) to check phones immediately upon waking. Females (23.9%) are substantially more likely than males (13.6%) to wait more than 2 hours.

This ten-percentage-point gap suggests that females are less likely to check their phones immediately when they start their day than males. The lower likelihood of women using their phone immediately upon waking may reflect the early-morning responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women, such as preparing meals, getting family members ready, or other household tasks. While the survey does not directly measure these activities, the pattern is consistent with broader research showing that women spend more time on unpaid domestic work.

Emotional Experiences Online: What Young People Feel 6.6

When asked about feelings associated with spending time online or on their phones, respondents report a range of emotional experiences. The most commonly reported experience is feeling tired, irritated, or mentally exhausted, cited by 17.4% of respondents. This is followed by guilt or regret about time spent online (7.6%), not having noticed anything specific (7.4%), anxiety or feeling overwhelmed combined with FOMO when seeing others' posts (7.1%), and loneliness (5.9%). Only 4.1% report generally feeling fine or positive, while 10.3% indicate they do not spend long hours online.

The prevalence of tiredness and mental exhaustion as the most commonly reported emotional experience aligns with research documenting what scholars term "social media fatigue" or "digital exhaustion." The constant availability of information, the pressure to respond to notifications, and the cognitive demands of navigating multiple platform presences can create cumulative mental load that manifests as exhaustion (Pooley, 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Emotional Patterns by Gender 6.6.1

Gender shapes emotional experiences online in ways that connect to other findings in this report. Females (17.9%) and males (17.2%) report similar rates of feeling tired, irritated, or mentally exhausted, suggesting this experience cuts across gender lines. However, females report higher rates of guilt or regret about time spent online (9.1% versus 5.9% for males) and higher rates of having not noticed anything specific (9.4% versus 5.5%).

Males report higher rates of 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) and anxiety when seeing others' posts (8.3% versus 5.3% for females) and higher rates of loneliness (6.5% versus 5.2%). Males are also more likely to report generally feeling fine or positive (5.1% versus 2.9% for females).

Synthesising the Patterns: The Screen Time, Routine Usage of Phones, and Wellbeing Connection 6.7

A key question emerges from examining these indicators separately: How do screen time, morning phone habits, and emotional experiences relate to one another? While cross-sectional data cannot establish causation, examining the patterns together reveals a concerning cluster.

Those who check their phones immediately upon waking show elevated rates of negative emotional experiences. 22.4% report feeling tired, irritated, or mentally exhausted. They also show higher rates of combined negative experiences (simultaneously reporting tiredness, loneliness, FOMO, or guilt) and lower rates of "generally feeling fine or positive."

Heavy screen time users (those spending 6 or more hours daily) show similar patterns. Compared with light users (less than 3 hours daily), heavy users report higher rates of feeling tired and exhausted, more FOMO experiences, greater guilt about time spent, and lower rates of having "not noticed anything specific" or feeling fine.

The triangulation becomes compelling: young people who spend more hours online are also more likely to reach for their phones immediately upon waking, and simultaneously report higher levels of emotional exhaustion. This clustering suggests a pattern of intensive digital engagement that spans quantity (total hours), timing (immediate morning engagement), and subjective experience (exhaustion and negative emotions).

Interpreting the Cluster with Appropriate Caution   6.7.1

Several important cautions apply to interpreting this pattern. Most fundamentally, correlation is not causation. Heavy screen time might cause negative emotions, or negative emotions might drive people toward heavy screen use as a coping mechanism, or both patterns might reflect underlying factors such as stress, loneliness, or difficult life circumstances that independently produce both heavy use and negative feelings.

Individual variation is substantial. The patterns describe tendencies across the sample, but many heavy users report positive experiences, and many light users struggle.

Self-report limitations also apply. Respondents may overestimate or underestimate their screen time (research suggests people often underestimate). Emotional reports capture how respondents felt at the moment of the survey, which may not represent their typical experience.

Implications

The screen time and morning habit findings suggest several considerations for different stakeholders.

For Platforms

The prevalence of exhaustion as the most common emotional experience points toward design choices that might mitigate this effect. Features that support intentional use rather than maximising engagement could help users who want to moderate their consumption. Usage dashboards that show time spent, break reminders that encourage pauses, and notification settings that allow users to reduce interruptions are examples of design choices that prioritise user wellbeing alongside engagement metrics. Some platforms have introduced such features, though questions remain about their prominence and effectiveness.

The morning engagement pattern suggests that phones have become integrated into the earliest moments of the day for most young users. Platforms might consider whether features like "morning digest" summaries could provide value without requiring extended engagement, or whether default settings could be adjusted to reduce the pull toward immediate extensive use.

For Parents and Educators

Rather than fixating on hours or imposing blanket restrictions, conversations might focus on experiential questions: How do you feel after using your phone? What activities are you doing during that time? Is your phone use serving your goals? Helping young people develop metacognitive awareness of their own patterns, noticing relationships between their digital behaviour and their moods or energy levels, may be more valuable than external rules about acceptable use.

For Young People

Building awareness of personal patterns enables informed self-regulation. Noticing how morning habits affect the rest of the day, observing relationships between screen time and mood, and paying attention to which activities leave one feeling energised versus depleted all contribute to developing agency over digital life. The finding that immediate morning phone checking correlates with higher exhaustion rates suggests an experiment many young people could try: delaying phone engagement for 15 to 30 minutes after waking and noticing whether this affects how the day unfolds. Not all experiments will produce noticeable effects, but the practice of experimentation itself builds awareness and agency.

For Researchers

Longitudinal studies tracking individuals over time would clarify whether the correlations observed here reflect causal relationships and, if so, in which direction. Experience sampling methods that capture mood and behaviour multiple times daily could reveal within-person dynamics that cross-sectional surveys miss. The field needs to move beyond documenting correlations toward understanding mechanisms that could inform effective interventions.

Online Safety Experiences

What harms do young Indians encounter online, and from whom? This chapter examines the landscape of digital risk through the lens of actual experiences reported by survey respondents. Rather than presenting safety merely as a set of statistics, we frame these findings as part of a journey that young people navigate: encountering harm, responding to it, seeking support, and adjusting their behaviour going forward. The chapters that follow on self expression (Chapter 7) and help-seeking (Chapter 8) continue this journey, exploring how young people adapt after negative experiences.

Exposure to Harm: The Overall Picture   7.1

Personal Experience of Online Harms   % responding "Yes, I have" for each harm type

Harm type	Percentage
Unwanted contact (known)	37.9%
Disturbing content	27.9%
Unwanted contact (strangers)	23.4%
Bullying/harassment	22.3%
Scams/fraud	19.6%
Photo misuse	12.3%

Percentage
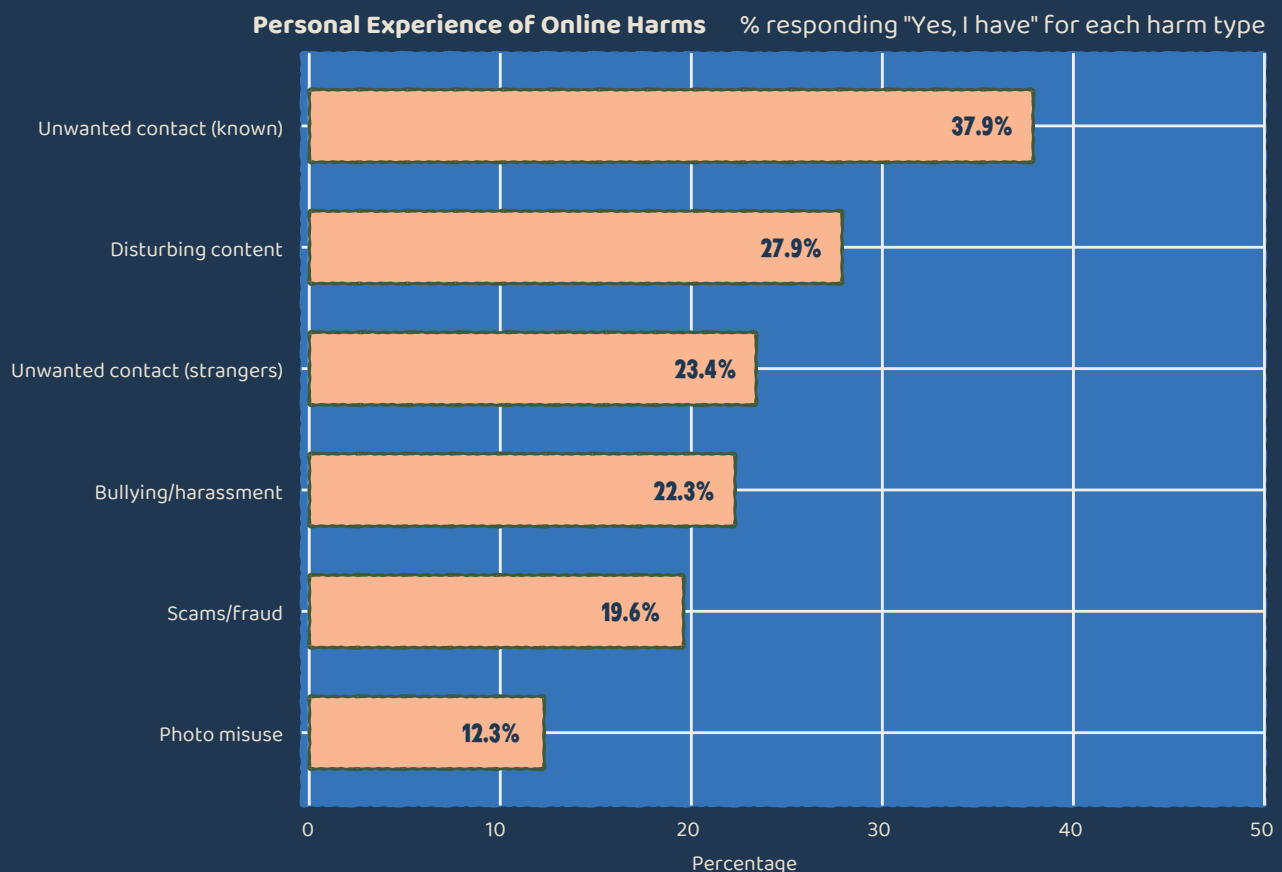
Before examining specific harm types, understanding the overall landscape helps set context. Direct personal experience rates ("Yes, I have") vary substantially across harm categories. Unwanted contact from known persons leads at 37.9%, followed by disturbing content at 27.9%, unwanted contact from strangers at 23.4%, bullying and harassment at 22.3%, scams and fraud at 19.6%, and photo misuse at 12.3%.
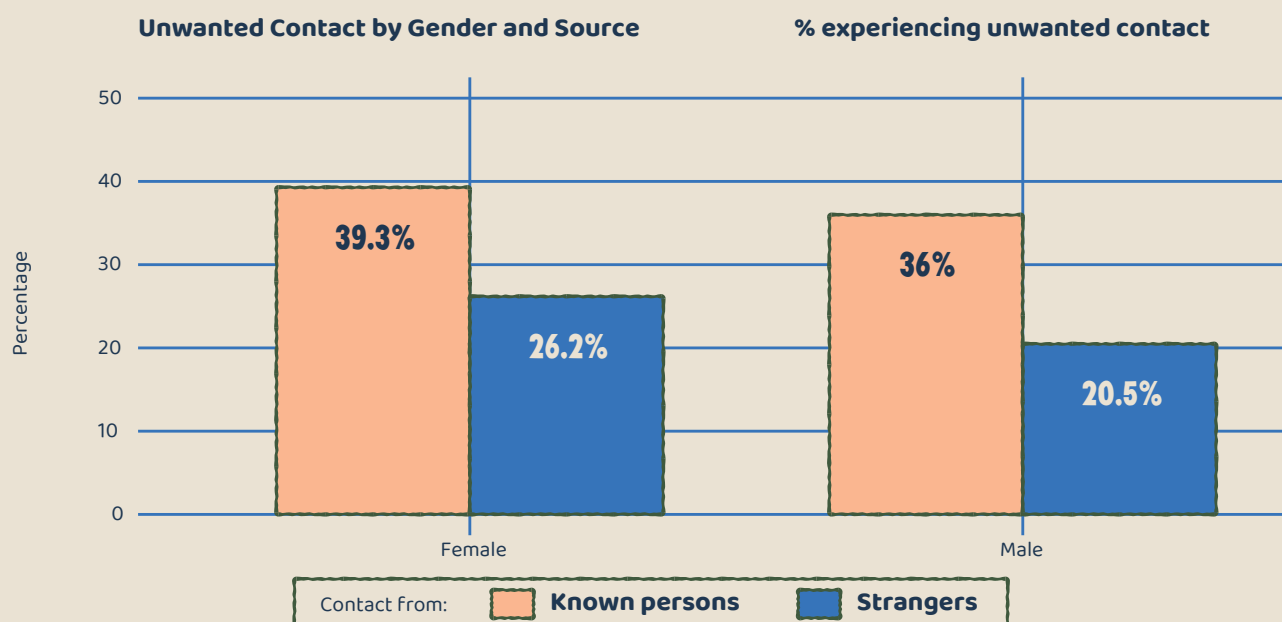
These rates represent the proportion of respondents who personally experienced each harm type. When we add those who report that someone in their family or a friend experienced the harm, overall exposure rates are considerably higher. For unwanted contact from known persons, 18.8% report knowing someone who experienced this, bringing total proximate exposure to over half of all respondents. This suggests that negative online experiences are not rare occurrences affecting isolated individuals but rather widespread phenomena that touch most young people either directly or through their close social networks.

The hierarchy of harm types itself tells a story. That contact risks (from known and unknown persons) rank higher than content risks challenges assumptions that exposure to harmful material is the primary concern. Young people are more likely to experience problematic interactions than problematic content, though both deserve attention.

Contact Risks: The Known-Person Challenge 7.2

The finding that unwanted contact from known persons (37.9%) substantially exceeds stranger-initiated contact (23.4%) represents one of the most important patterns in the data. This challenges dominant safety narratives that have emphasised stranger danger while underrepresenting what researchers have termed the peer-based or public dimensions of contact risk (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Unwanted Contact by Gender and Source   **% experiencing unwanted contact**

Bar chart — Percentage (y-axis) by gender (Female, Male). Female: Known persons 39.3%, Strangers 26.2%. Male: Known persons 36%, Strangers 20.5%. Contact from: Known persons (orange), Strangers (blue).

Understanding Known-Person Contact 7.2.1

What does unwanted contact from known persons actually look like? This category encompasses a range of experiences: unwelcome messages or communications from friends or acquaintances, inappropriate content shared by people in one's social network, pressure or requests from known individuals that caused discomfort, and boundary-crossing behaviours from classmates, romantic interests, or even family members. The common thread is that the person initiating contact is someone the respondent knows personally, not an anonymous stranger.

Research has increasingly documented that young people face substantial risks from within their social circles rather than exclusively from unknown individuals (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2019; Cernikova et al., 2018).
A classmate who shares embarrassing photos without permission, an ex-partner who continues unwanted communication, a friend who pressures for personal information, or an acquaintance who sends inappropriate messages all fall within this category. Platform safety features often emphasise stranger-focused protections while providing less robust tools for managing problematic behaviour from connected contacts.

Gender Patterns in Known-Person Contact 7.2.2

Females (39.3%) experience slightly higher rates of unwanted contact from known persons than males (36.0%), a difference of approximately three percentage points. While this gap is not dramatic, it aligns with broader research documenting gendered harassment patterns where women face more appearance-based and sexually oriented unwanted attention in both online and offline contexts.

However, the finding that a substantial share of male respondents (36.0%) also report unwanted online contact complicates narratives that frame online harassment as primarily affecting girls. Prior research shows that while girls are more likely to experience distress such as loneliness or sadness and seek social support in response, boys' experiences of peer harassment often take different forms, including competitive or status-driven interactions shaped by peer pressure and norms around popularity (Espino et al., 2023). As a result, similar levels of exposure may be interpreted, labelled, or responded to differently across genders, even when the underlying experiences might be comparable.

Age Patterns in unwanted contact from known persons 7.2.3

Personal experience of unwanted contact from known persons escalates sharply across adolescence. Among those aged 11 to 13, 32.6% report personally experiencing such contact. This rises to 48.8% at ages 14 to 16, then surges to 73.4% at ages 17 to 18, more than doubling from youngest to oldest adolescents.

What explains this vulnerability window at 17 to 18? This developmental period represents a transition moment characterised by expanding social networks as young people prepare for or enter higher education, increased romantic interest and dating activity (Brown & Larson, 2009), greater independence from parental oversight without yet having developed adult social skills and boundary-setting capacities, and exposure to new social contexts where familiar rules may not apply (Steinberg, 2014).

This finding suggests that safety programming targeted at the 17 to 18 transition period could be particularly impactful, helping young people navigate a moment when risk exposure appears to peak.

Regional Variation: Multiple Indias Online 7.2.4

Regional differences in known-person contact experiences are substantial and reveal different digital safety landscapes across India. Northeastern India shows the highest rate at 67.2%, followed by Northern India at 65.5%. These rates are dramatically higher than Central India (30.5%), Western India (31.2%), Southern India (24.2%), and Eastern India (39.0%).

The variation between Northeastern India (67.2%) and Southern India (24.2%) represents nearly a three-fold difference. Understanding what drives these regional disparities requires contextual analysis that survey data alone cannot provide, but several factors may contribute. Regional differences in platform usage patterns, cultural norms around digital communication, enforcement of privacy boundaries, and local social dynamics all likely play roles.

Urban-Rural Patterns 7.2.5

Urban and semi-urban areas show higher known-person contact rates than rural areas: 42.2% in metros, 40.5% in towns, and 30.0% in rural areas. This twelve-percentage-point gap between metros and rural areas likely reflects several factors: denser social networks in urban environments, more intensive digital engagement, greater platform adoption, and perhaps different norms around digital communication.

Stranger Contact: A Different Pattern (7.2.6)

Stranger-initiated contact (23.4% overall) follows somewhat different demographic patterns than known-person contact. The gender gap is larger for stranger contact: 26.2% of females report this experience compared with 20.5% of males, a difference of nearly six percentage points. Females are approximately 28% more likely to report unwanted contact from strangers, aligning with concerns about women facing disproportionate unsolicited attention from unknown individuals online.

This gender disparity for stranger contact is more pronounced than for known-person contact, suggesting that anonymous or unknown perpetrators target women at higher rates than they target men. In comparing age groups, personal experience of unwanted contact from strangers peaks at ages 14 to 16 (21.3%) rather than at ages 17 to 18 (12.0%). Among the youngest adolescents aged 11 to 13, 12.3% report personal experience. However, the picture changes when examining vicarious exposure. The proportion reporting that someone in their family or a friend has experienced stranger contact rises dramatically: from 21.3% at ages 11 to 13, to 41.8% at ages 14 to 16, to 67.2% at ages 17 to 18. By ages 17 to 18, two-thirds of respondents know someone who has received unwanted contact from strangers, indicating the pervasiveness of this phenomenon in adolescent social worlds.

Content Risks: Seeing unwanted content that is disturbing, violent, or sexual in nature (7.3)

Over one-quarter of respondents (27.9%) have encountered disturbing, violent, or sexual content online without actively searching for it. The emphasis on passive exposure is important: these are not young people deliberately searching for harmful material but rather encountering it through algorithmic recommendations, content shared by contacts, material that appears while browsing, or unsolicited messages containing disturbing content.

Age Patterns in Risky Content Exposure (7.3.2)

Exposure to disturbing, violent, or sexual content peaks in mid-adolescence. Among those aged 11 to 13, 10.4% report personally seeing such content. This more than doubles to 24.6% at ages 14 to 16, then unexpectedly declines to 17.7% at ages 17 to 18.

The mid-adolescent peak may reflect a period of heightened curiosity and exploratory browsing before later adolescents develop more refined content filtering habits or experience normalisation effects that change how they categorise

disturbing material. Vicarious exposure follows a similar pattern: 11.0% at ages 11 to 13, rising to 20.5% at ages 14 to 16, then falling to 15.0% at ages 17 to 18. Notably, the "No" response rate is highest among both youngest (64.1%) and oldest (60.1%) adolescents, with a dip to 45.7% at ages 14 to 16, reinforcing mid-adolescence as a period of heightened content exposure.

The Urban-Rural Risky Content Exposure Gap 7.3.3

The urban-rural gap in content exposure is substantial: 36.7% in metros, 30.8% in towns, and 14.3% in rural areas. Metro residents report more than 2.5 times the exposure rate of rural residents. This pattern likely reflects both greater internet engagement in metros (more time online means more opportunity for exposure) and algorithmic dynamics that surface more content to highly active users.

Conduct Risks: Harmful Online Behaviour (Bullying, Gambling, Self-Harm) 7.4

Nearly one-quarter of respondents (22.3%) have personally experienced or witnessed harmful online behaviour including bullying, harassment, gambling content, or self-harm material. This category captures both direct victimisation and witnessing incidents affecting others,highlighting the pervasive nature of harmful online conduct and offering a more honest reflection of its prevalence within young people's digital environments where harm is not only experienced individually but is routinely observed, normalised, and shared.

Age Patterns in Bullying Exposure 7.4.1

Exposure to harmful online behaviour including bullying, gambling, and self-harm content increases steadily across adolescence. Personal experience rises from 9.6% at ages 11 to 13, to 20.2% at ages 14 to 16, to 23.2% at ages 17 to 18. Vicarious exposure shows an even steeper gradient. The proportion reporting that a family member or friend has experienced such behaviour rises from 14.9% at ages 11 to 13, to 22.3% at ages 14 to 16, to 35.6% at ages 17 to 18.

When combining personal and vicarious experience, the majority of older adolescents have direct or proximate exposure to harmful online behaviour: 58.8% at ages 17 to 18 report either personal experience or knowing someone affected, compared with 24.5% at ages 11 to 13.

Gender and Bullying: Challenging Assumptions 7.4.2

Males (23.3%) and females (21.2%) report similar rates of bullying and harassment exposure. This finding challenges stereotypes that position online bullying as primarily targeting females. Both genders experience substantial exposure, though the specific nature of harassment may differ.

Research suggests that males experience more direct aggression and public humiliation while females experience more relational aggression and appearance-based targeting, but both forms cause harm (Copp et al., 2021; Espino et al., 2023).

Contract Risks: Experiencing or witnessing harmful and exploitative online scams and frauds 7.5

Nearly one-fifth of respondents (19.6%) have personally experienced or witnessed exploitative online scams and fraud. This category encompasses phishing attempts, fraudulent offers, romance scams, fake job postings, pyramid schemes, and other deceptive practices designed to extract money, personal information, or other resources.

The Age-Commerce Connection 7.5.1

Exposure to online scams and frauds remains relatively consistent for personal experience across adolescence: 13.5% at ages 11 to 13, 15.7% at ages 14 to 16, and 14.6% at ages 17 to 18. Unlike interpersonal harms, scam exposure does not show a pronounced age gradient for personal victimisation.

However, awareness of scams affecting others increases markedly. Vicarious exposure rises from 15.7% at ages 11 to 13, to 31.8% at ages 14 to 16, to 35.7% at ages 17 to 18. This pattern likely reflects both expanding social awareness and the cumulative nature of scam exposure in one's network over time. Combining personal and vicarious experience, approximately half of older adolescents (50.3% at ages 17 to 18) have encountered scams directly or through someone they know, compared with 29.2% at ages 11 to 13.

Metro Concentration

Metro residents (25.6%) face higher scam exposure than those in towns (16.2%) and rural areas (16.2%). The nine-percentage-point gap between metros and non-metro areas likely reflects greater online commercial activity in urban settings, more sophisticated targeting of metro populations, and higher digital transaction volumes that create more opportunity for fraud exposure.

Photo Misuse

7.6

Photo misuse, having one's photographs shared or used inappropriately without consent, affects 12.3% of respondents overall. While this rate is lower than other harm categories, the intimate and enduring nature of image-based harm makes these experiences particularly impactful. Unlike a harmful message that can be deleted, a photo once shared can circulate indefinitely and resurface across platforms and time.

Gender Patterns in Photo Misuse

7.6.1

Males (14.2%) report higher photo misuse rates than females (9.9%), a pattern that may initially seem counterintuitive given narratives emphasising image-based abuse of women. Several factors may explain this finding. Different social dynamics in male peer groups may involve more casual image sharing and manipulation that registers as "misuse."

Underreporting among females may occur due to greater stigma attached to image-based victimisation of women, where disclosure itself can invite judgment. Definitional differences may also play a role, with males and females interpreting "misuse" differently based on gendered expectations about image sharing.
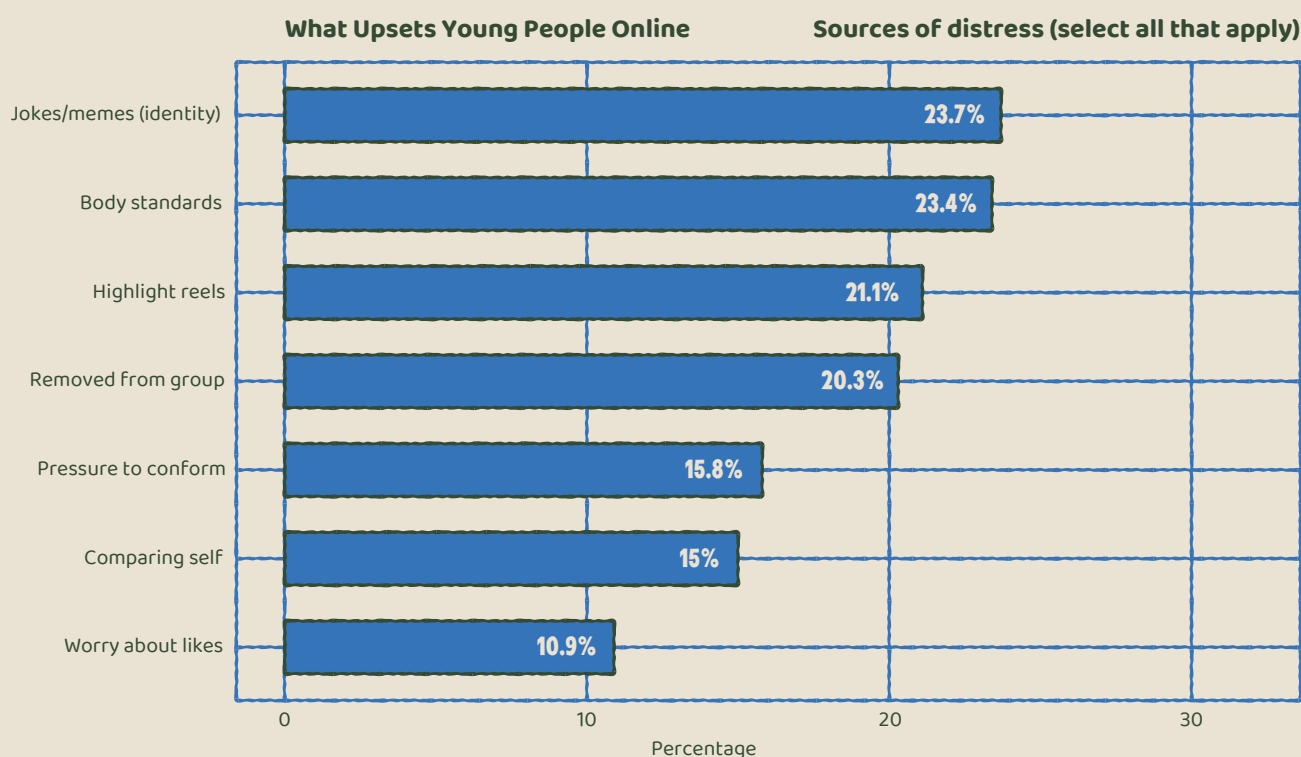
The 17-18 Peak in Photo Misuse

7.6.2

Photo misuse shows relatively stable personal experience rates across adolescence: 11.2% at ages 11 to 13, 12.5% at ages 14 to 16, and 10.3% at ages 17 to 18. Unlike other harms, personal experience does not escalate with age during adolescence.

What does change dramatically is uncertainty. The "Not sure" response rises from 3.7% at ages 11 to 13, to 12.2% at ages 14 to 16, to a striking 39.4% at ages 17 to 18. This suggests that older adolescents may suspect their photos have been misused but cannot confirm it, reflecting the opacity of image circulation in digital environments. Correspondingly, the "No" response drops sharply from 66.2% at ages 11 to 13, to 49.3% at ages 14 to 16, to just 28.8% at ages 17 to 18. By late adolescence, fewer than one in three respondents can confidently say their photos have not been misused.

What Upsets Young People: Going Beyond Experiences of Direct Harm

7.7

What Upsets Young People Online   Sources of distress (select all that apply)

Category	Percentage
Jokes/memes (identity)	23.7%
Body standards	23.4%
Highlight reels	21.1%
Removed from group	20.3%
Pressure to conform	15.8%
Comparing self	15%
Worry about likes	10.9%

Percentage

Beyond specific harm categories, the survey asked what has upset respondents or their friends online in the past. The responses reveal concerns that extend beyond direct victimisation to encompass the ambient climate of digital spaces, with nearly one in four young people identifying content-related distress. . By capturing everyday sources of distress such as social comparison, exclusion, or pressure to perform online, this section recognises that well-being in digital spaces is shaped not only by extreme incidents, but also by subtle, cumulative experiences. These insights help draw deeper connections between online engagement and emotional well-being, enabling a more holistic understanding of how young people experience, internalise, and navigate the digital world.

"Seeing specific body types (thin, tall) or beauty standards promoted online" was cited by 23.4%, nearly matching the prevalence of identity-based content concerns. This finding connects to extensive research on social media's role in shaping body image expectations, particularly among adolescents (Fardouly et al., 2015). "Seeing only highlight reels or perfect moments from other people's lives" was reported as a cause of distress by 21.1% of respondents, reinforcing concerns about social comparison and its effects on mental health (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Young people recognise the curated nature of social media, understanding intellectually that posts represent selected moments rather than complete lives, yet still experience negative effects from comparison. The awareness that comparison is problematic however does not immunise against its effects. A further 15.0% explicitly cited "comparing yourself to others based on what they post" as a source of upset, suggesting that social comparison operates both passively (through exposure to highlight reels) and actively (through direct self-comparison).

Social exclusion also features prominently: 20.3% reported being upset by "being removed from a group chat or unfollowed without explanation," while 10.4% cited "being ignored or getting no response to your posts or messages." These forms of digital rejection, though less visible than overt harassment, can carry significant emotional weight for young people whose social lives are substantially mediated through online platforms.

Gendered Patterns in What Upsets 7.6.1

Males report higher rates of distress from social dynamics: being removed from group chats or unfollowed (23.2% vs 19.0%), seeing highlight reels from others (24.5% vs 19.9%), and getting unexpected reactions to posts (12.4% vs 9.6%). These patterns suggest that males may be more attuned to, or more willing to report, disruptions to social belonging and public feedback.

Females report modestly higher rates of distress from self-comparison: comparing yourself to others based on what they post (16.8% vs 13.8%) and feeling pressure to change how you speak, dress, or behave online (16.7% vs 15.4%). However, body standards show near-identical concern across genders (23.7% female vs 23.3% male), suggesting that idealised body imagery affects young people broadly rather than being a uniquely female concern.

Interestingly, females were more likely to indicate "not something I've thought about" (15.5% vs 12.1%) or "none of these seem uncomfortable to me" (12.1% vs 9.0%), which may reflect different engagement patterns with the question or genuinely lower salience of these ambient concerns relative to direct harms females experience at higher rates.

Why Some Groups May Under-Report 7.8

Survey data on sensitive topics like harm exposure inevitably reflects not only actual experiences but also willingness to disclose. Several groups may systematically under-report negative experiences, leading to underestimates of actual prevalence. Younger respondents may lack vocabulary or frameworks to recognise certain experiences as harm. A 12-year-old who receives uncomfortable messages from a classmate may not conceptualise this as "unwanted contact" when answering a survey question on the same, particularly if such interactions are normalised in their peer environment.

Males may under-report due to gendered expectations around resilience and self-reliance. Research on masculinity and help-seeking has documented that men often avoid acknowledging vulnerability or seeking help, with disclosure itself perceived as threatening masculine identity (Gough & Novikova, 2020; Lynch et al., 2018). A young man who experienced online harassment may be less likely to report it if doing so feels like admitting weakness.

Respondents from conservative family contexts may under-report experiences they fear would trigger parental punishment or restriction rather than support. A young woman whose family would respond to reported harassment by taking away her phone may rationally choose not to disclose.

These reporting dynamics mean that the rates documented in this chapter likely represent lower bounds rather than complete prevalence estimates. The true extent of harm exposure among Indian youth is probably higher than these figures suggest.

Implications 7.10

The online safety findings suggest several considerations for different stakeholders concerned with youth digital wellbeing.

For Platforms 7.10.1

The prominence of known-person contact risks (37.9%) requires attention beyond stranger-focused safety features. Most platform safety design emphasises protecting users from unknown individuals through features like message filtering from non-contacts, age verification, and stranger blocking. While these features remain important, they do not address problematic behaviour from people already in one's network.

For Policymakers

Regulatory frameworks should address the full 4Cs spectrum rather than focusing narrowly on particular risk types. Content moderation requirements, while important, do not address contact risks within social networks. A comprehensive approach recognises that young people face multiple, interconnected risk types that require coordinated response.

For Parents and Educators

Conversations about online safety should move decisively beyond "don't talk to strangers" to include navigating difficult situations with known individuals: peers, classmates, romantic interests, and even family members. The stranger danger paradigm, while not entirely wrong, is incomplete in ways that leave young people unprepared for the most common source of harm they will actually encounter.

The 17 to 18 vulnerability window suggests that targeted programming for this transition period could be particularly valuable. Young people preparing for higher education or entering the workforce face expanded social networks and reduced parental oversight precisely when risk exposure appears to peak.

For Young People

Understanding that harms often emerge from within social networks, not only from strangers, can inform personal safety strategies. This means considering what to share with whom, recognising when interactions with known individuals become uncomfortable, understanding that familiarity does not equal safety, and knowing that it is legitimate to set boundaries with friends and acquaintances just as one would with strangers.

The finding that over one-third of young people experience unwanted contact from people they know means such experiences, while unpleasant, are not rare or shameful. Young people who encounter problematic behaviour from contacts are not alone, and seeking support is both legitimate and likely to help.

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² Online risks faced by young people are often understood through the 4Cs framework, which groups harms into four broad categories: content risks (exposure to harmful or inappropriate material), contact risks (unwanted interaction, grooming, or harassment), conduct risks (harmful behaviours such as bullying, coercion, or sharing without consent), and commerce risks (financial exploitation, scams, or misuse of personal data). This framework helps situate young people's online vulnerabilities not as a single type of harm, but as overlapping risks that can intensify during transitional periods such as late adolescence (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Self-Restraint and Online Expression

Self-restraint in the digital context is the voluntary restriction of one's online expression due to anticipated reactions from others, concerns about privacy, parental oversight, or broader social pressures. Unlike external censorship where platforms or authorities remove content, self-restraint represents internal decisions about what to share and what to withhold. This chapter examines what young Indians hold back online, why they exercise restraint, and what these patterns reveal about the hidden costs of navigating digital environments.

The Scope of Self-Restraint

Self–restraint Behaviours

In the past year, have you stopped yourself from doing these

Behaviour	Percentage
Posting your photos or videos	18.2%
Starting conversations with people you don't know online	12.4%
Sharing personal details like your religion, gender, or sexual orientation	9.5%
Talking openly about your experiences or opinions	8.4%
Discussing, posting about news, current affairs, or politics	5.8%

Percentage

Self-censorship is nearly universal among survey respondents. Only 9.1% report they have not held back from expressing themselves online fully. The remaining 90% or more have modified their digital behaviour in some way due to anticipated consequences, concerns about judgment, or privacy considerations.
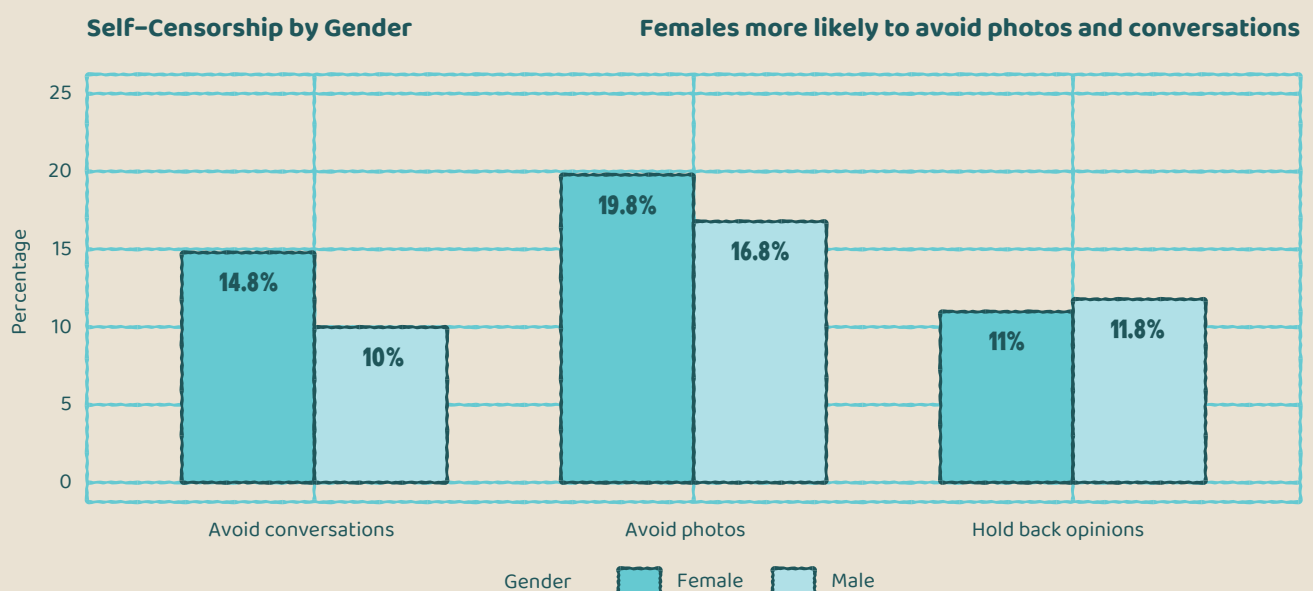
The most common forms of restraint involve visual self-presentation and social initiation. 18.2% of respondents reported avoiding posting photos or videos of themselves.. Avoiding starting conversations with strangers is reported by 12.4%. Avoiding sharing personal details is reported by 9.5%. Avoiding talking openly about experiences is cited by 8.4%, while avoiding discussing news and politics is reported by 5.8%.

These patterns suggest strategic choices about self-presentation and privacy rather than simple fear of online spaces. Young people are not withdrawing entirely but rather selectively engaging, choosing what to reveal and what to protect based on their assessment of risks and benefits. The sophistication of these choices challenges narratives that position young people as naive digital natives who share indiscriminately.

The hierarchy of the types of restraint shown by young people is itself revealing. Visual content (photos and videos) tops the list, reflecting awareness that images carry particular risks: they can be screenshot, shared, manipulated, and decontextualised in ways that text cannot. Stranger contact ranks second, reflecting prudent caution about unknown individuals. Personal details and open discussion of experiences come next, suggesting protection of intimate information. Political and news discussion ranks lower, though still represents meaningful restraint on civic expression.

Why Young People Hold Back: A Climate of Judgment 8.2

Self–Censorship by Gender

Females more likely to avoid photos and conversations

Gender: Female, Male

When asked why they avoid certain activities online, the most commonly cited reasons reveal an environment characterised by surveillance and evaluation. Fear of judgment leads at 19.5%, with respondents citing "I did not want people to judge me" as their primary concern. Privacy protection follows at 11.2%, with respondents worrying that "someone might use or share my personal information." History of negative feedback accounts for 4.8%, representing those who have "received a lot of negative comments, messages, and reactions." Audience fragmentation is cited by 4.7%, with respondents noting that "my friends and family have very different opinions." Harassment experiences account for 4.1%, representing those who were "bullied or harassed online or offline because of something they posted."

The prominence of judgment fears (19.5%) as the leading reason for self-censorship deserves extended attention. This finding signals that online spaces are experienced as evaluative environments where self-expression carries reputation risks. Every post, photo, or comment becomes a potential basis for judgment by peers, family members, teachers, potential employers, and unknown observers. Under these conditions, restraint becomes self-protection.

The 11.2% citing privacy concerns reflects awareness that digital information, once shared, can be repurposed in ways the sharer never intended. This awareness represents sophisticated understanding of digital information flows rather than paranoid overreaction.

The 4.8% citing previous negative feedback represents the clearest connection between harm experiences and self-censorship. These individuals have received concrete evidence that their digital expression invites hostile response. Their subsequent restraint is a direct behavioural adaptation to experienced harm. The 4.1% citing harassment or bullying following posts represents an even more severe manifestation of the same dynamic, where posting led to targeted mistreatment rather than merely negative comments.

Gender Patterns in Self-Censorship: Asymmetric Costs   8.3

Gender significantly shapes self-censorship patterns in ways that connect to the differential harm exposure documented in Chapter 6. Females (19.8%) are substantially more likely than males (16.8%) to avoid posting photos of themselves, a three-percentage-point gap that reflects the gendered risks of visual self-presentation online.

This gender gap in avoiding to post photos is not arbitrary caution but rather rational response to differential risk. Research consistently documents that women face more appearance-based scrutiny and harassment online than men (Plan International, 2020).

A woman who posts a photo faces higher probability of receiving unsolicited comments about her appearance, unwanted romantic or sexual attention, or having her image screenshot and shared in contexts she did not intend. Under these conditions, avoiding photo posting represents strategic risk reduction.

Females are also more likely to avoid initiating conversations with strangers (14.8% versus 10.0% for males), reflecting heightened awareness of contact risks. This gap of nearly five-percentage-points aligns with findings from Chapter 6 that females experience higher rates of unwanted contact from strangers (26.2% versus 20.5% for males).

Urban-Rural Patterns: Different Digital Climate 8.4

Geographic differences in reported online distress suggest uneven salience of these concerns rather than their absence. Rural youth consistently report lower levels of online distress and are far more likely to say such issues are "not something I've thought about" (22.2%), compared with around 11% in metropolitan and other urban areas. This gap points to lower intensity or different forms of digital engagement in rural contexts, where fewer platforms, smaller networks, and more familiar audiences may reduce exposure to comparison, visibility pressures, and conflict.

In contrast, youth in the metro cities and other urban areas report higher distress linked to appearance norms, social comparison, exclusion, and evaluative metrics such as likes and shares. These patterns are consistent with more immersive and heterogeneous digital environments, where impression management and audience diversity make online interactions more emotionally charged. The difference appears to be one of frequency and exposure, not necessarily awareness or capacity to navigate online spaces.

The Self-Censorship Paradox: Awareness and Cost 8.5

Self-censorship represents a paradox at the heart of youth digital experience. On one hand, it demonstrates young people's awareness of digital risks and their capacity for strategic self-protection. Young people who hold back from posting photos, avoid stranger contact, and protect personal details are exercising judgment about digital self-presentation. This represents sophisticated understanding of digital environments rather than naive participation.

On the other hand, self-censorship reflects the costs imposed by hostile or evaluative online environments. The sociologist Erving Goffman described social life as involving impression management, the strategic presentation of self to different audiences (Goffman, 1949).

People have always exercised judgment about what to reveal and what to conceal based on context and audience. Digital environments intensify this dynamic in several ways. Posts persist in ways that spoken words do not, creating permanent records that can resurface across time. Audiences converge in ways that offline contexts do not, collapsing the separation between friend groups, family, and professional contacts. The scale of potential judgment expands, with any post potentially visible to hundreds or thousands of viewers. Under these conditions, self-censorship is the logical response to intensified impression management demands.

Yet self-censorship also has costs that deserve acknowledgment. Research suggests that young people who feel unable to express themselves authentically online may experience reduced sense of identity, fewer social connections, and missed opportunities for the identity exploration that digital spaces can provide. Social media offers genuine benefits: connection with like-minded peers, exposure to diverse perspectives, opportunities for creative expression, and spaces to explore identity outside parental oversight. The key is to help young people strike a balance.

What Young People Would Change: Design Implications 8.6

When asked what they would change about the internet, respondents frequently mentioned themes directly related to the drivers of self-censorship. Frequent mentions of the need to curb hate speech and trolling suggest an understanding that hostile online cultures suppress participation, while concerns about scams and fraud highlight unease about how personal information is used.

The call to reduce fake personas and performative pressure, while representing a smaller proportion of responses, reflects what scholars have described as authenticity fatigue, the exhaustion that comes from constant impression management and curated self-presentation (Pooley, 2021; Tirocchi, 2024).

Implications 8.7

The findings in this chapter suggest several considerations for different stakeholders concerned with youth digital wellbeing.

For Platforms

Features that allow graduated sharing, enabling users to show different content to different audiences, may support authentic expression while managing risk. Instagram's Close Friends feature, which allows sharing stories with a selected subset of followers, represents one such approach. Expanding such tools and making them more intuitive could help users navigate context collapse.

Platforms might also consider how design choices amplify or reduce judgment dynamics. Features like public like counts, visible follower numbers, and engagement metrics all contribute to the evaluative climate. . Some platforms have experimented with hiding these metrics, with mixed reception.

For Policymakers

Policies that improve content moderation effectiveness, increase platform accountability for user safety, and establish clearer standards for harassment response could reduce the hostile conditions that stifle self expression. The gender dimension deserves particular policy attention. If female users systematically exercise more restraint due to differential harassment exposure, they withdraw their participation. . Policies that specifically address gendered harassment and provide effective remedies for image-based abuse could help reduce the asymmetric burden that women currently bear.

For Parents and Educators

Conversations about self-censorship should recognise it as a strategic skill rather than pathologising all restraint. Useful conversations might explore questions like: What are you choosing not to share online, and why? Are those choices reflecting your preferences about privacy and audience, or are they responses to experiences of judgment or harassment? Do you feel you can express yourself authentically in digital spaces, or do you hold back things you would like to share? What would need to change for you to feel more comfortable expressing yourself online?

For Young People

Privacy-protective choices reflect awareness and judgment, not inadequacy or fear. Every time one decides not to post a photo, chooses not to engage with a stranger, or holds back a controversial opinion, one is exercising digital judgment that most peers exercise as well.

At the same time, reflecting on one's own self-censorship patterns can be valuable. Are the restraints serving one's interests, or are they responses to environments that could be different? If fear of judgment prevents authentic expression that would benefit from connection with others, that represents a cost worth considering. If harassment experiences have led to broad withdrawal from digital participation, seeking support and potentially changing platforms or audiences might restore opportunities that self-censorship currently forecloses.
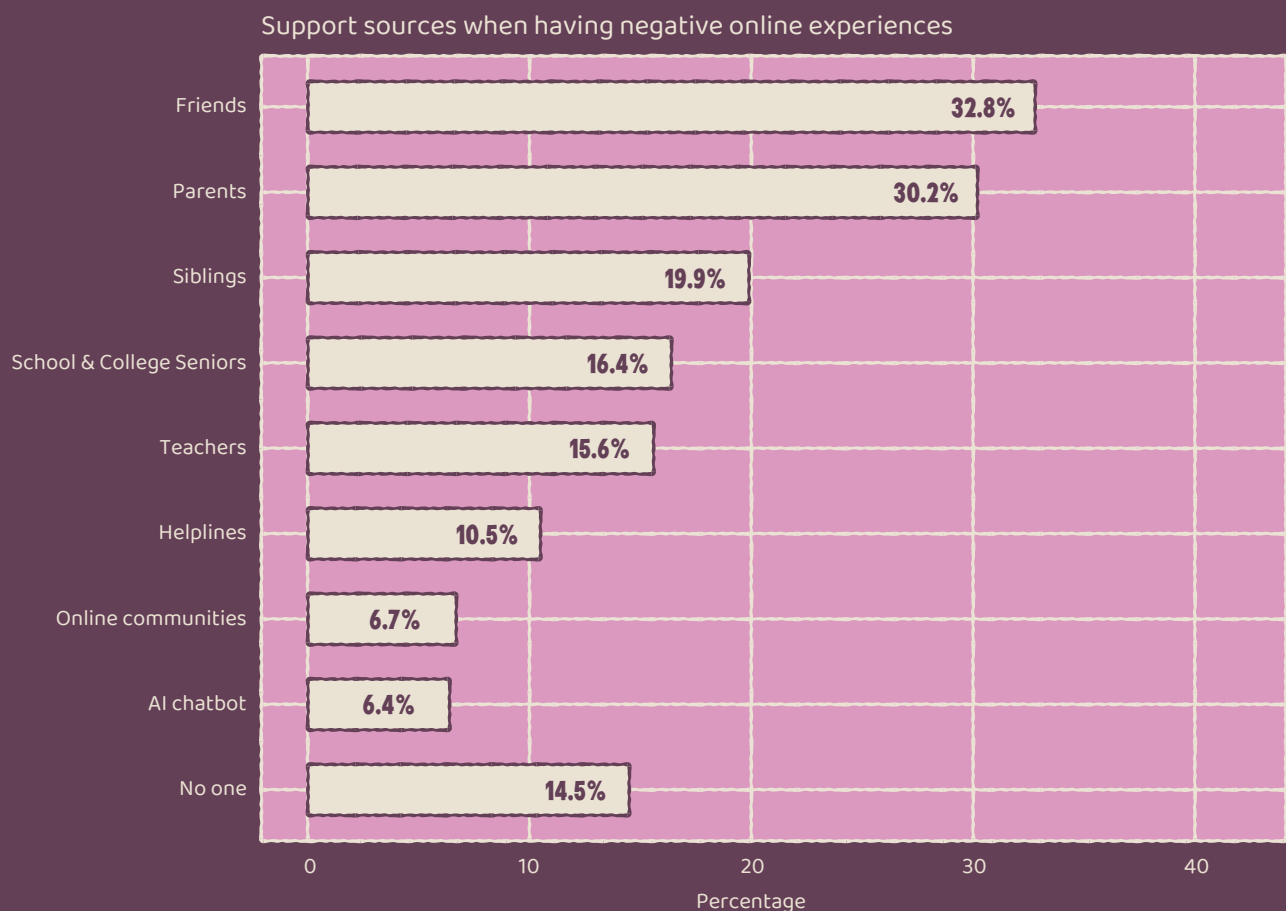
The goal is developing judgment about when to share and when to protect, skills that transfer far beyond digital contexts into offline life. Learning to read audiences, assess risks, manage impression formation, and balance authenticity with prudence are lifelong skills that digital environments, for all their challenges, provide opportunity to practice and develop.

Help-Seeking and Support Networks

When young people encounter negative experiences online, where do they turn? This chapter examines the support networks that young Indians draw upon when facing uncomfortable, unsafe, or distressing digital experiences. The patterns reveal important insights about trust, accessibility, and the gaps in formal support systems.

Who Young People Turn To

Support sources when having negative online experiences

| Support source	Percentage
Friends	32.8%
Parents	30.2%
Siblings	19.9%
School & College Seniors	16.4%
Teachers	15.6%
Helplines	10.5%
Online communities	6.7%
AI chatbot	6.4%
No one	14.5%

The survey asked respondents who they usually talk to if they have a bad, uncomfortable, or unsafe online experience. Friends and parents emerge as the primary sources of support, with roughly one-third of respondents citing each.

Friends were the most commonly cited source of support at 32.8%, followed closely by parents at 30.2%. Siblings provided support for nearly one in five respondents (19.9%), while school and college seniors (16.4%) and teachers (15.6%) each served as confidants for approximately one in six young people. Notably, 14.5% reported telling no one about their negative online experiences, suggesting a substantial minority navigate digital harms without any interpersonal support.

Formal support channels reached a smaller but notable proportion of respondents. Helplines and counsellors were cited by 10.5%, while emerging digital support options, specifically online anonymous communities such as Reddit (6.7%) and AI chatbots like ChatGPT (6.4%), were used by smaller proportions. The relatively low uptake of formal support channels suggests either limited awareness, accessibility barriers, or a preference for informal support networks among young people.

Gender Differences in Help-Seeking 9.2

Help–Seeking by Gender
Males more likely to tell no one; females turn to family
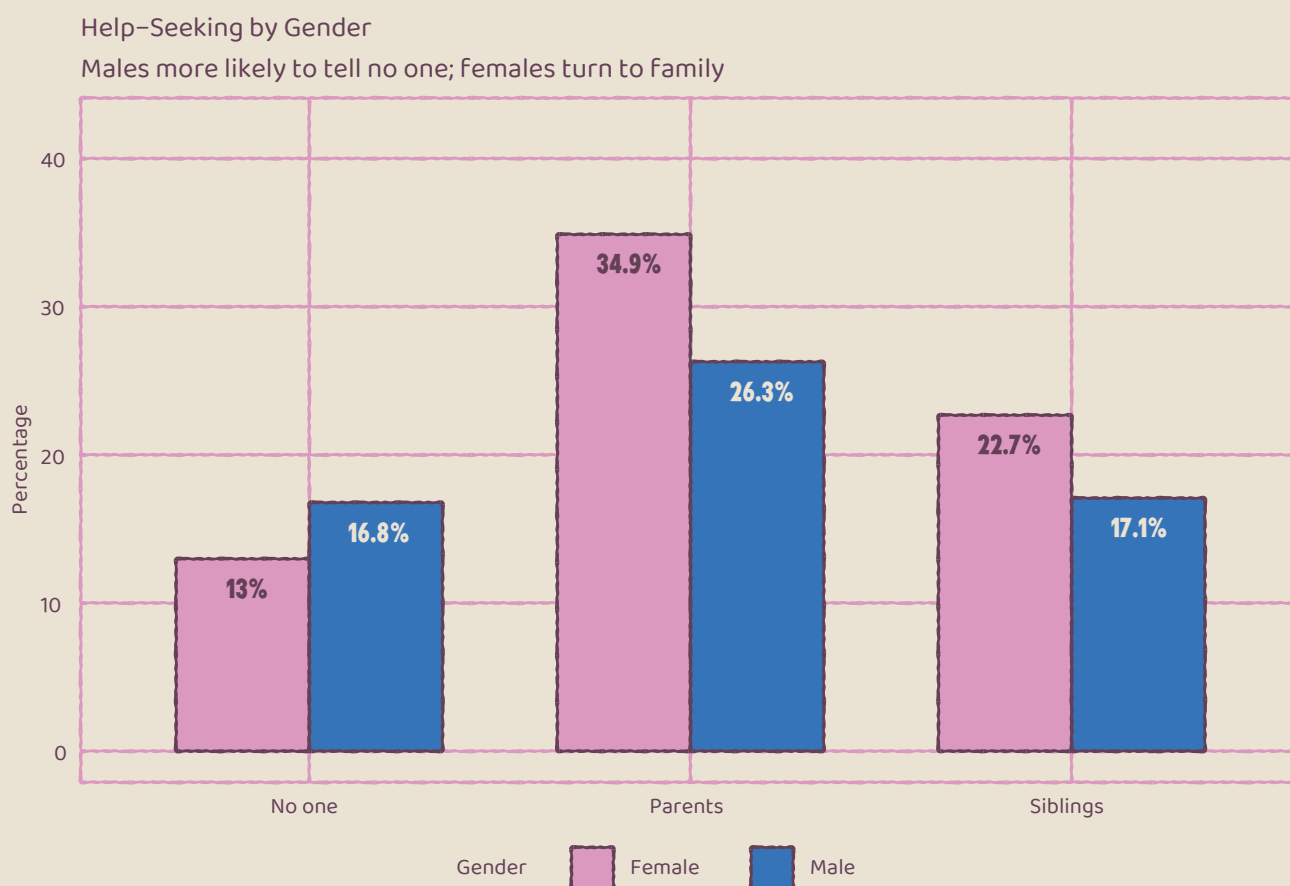
Gender shapes help-seeking behaviour in meaningful ways. Females were substantially more likely than males to turn to family members when facing online harms. The gender gap was particularly pronounced for parents: 34.9% of females spoke to parents compared with 26.3% of males, a difference of 8.6 percentage points. A similar pattern emerged for siblings, with females at 22.7% versus males at 17.1%.

Males, by contrast, were more likely to report telling no one about their negative online experiences: 16.8% of males compared with 13.0% of females. Males also showed higher usage of online anonymous communities (8.0% versus 5.2%), suggesting a preference for detached, anonymous support over personal disclosure to family members.

These patterns align with broader research on gendered communication norms. Studies on adolescent help-seeking consistently find that young men face social penalties for emotional disclosure, particularly within peer groups where vulnerability may be perceived as weakness (Vogel et al., 2011).

Age Patterns in Disclosure 9.3

Help-seeking patterns shift dramatically across adolescence and young adulthood, reflecting developmental changes in autonomy, peer orientation, and family relationships.

Reliance on parents for support drops sharply from early adolescence through the late teenage years. Among 11 to 13 year-olds, 45.1% reported talking to parents about bad online experiences. This figure fell to 31.3% at ages 14 to 16 and reached its lowest point at 20.8% among 17 to 18 year-olds. Friends follow a different trajectory. Peer support was highest among the youngest respondents at 43.5% for ages 11 to 13, then declined through adolescence to a low of 20.9% at ages 17 to 18, before recovering to 44.0% among 25 to 30 year-olds. The U-shaped pattern suggests that the 17 to 18 age group represents a distinctive transitional period.

The 17 to 18 age group stands out as particularly isolated. This cohort showed the lowest rates of disclosure to both friends (20.9%) and parents (20.8%) of any age group. These young people are navigating a critical transition between secondary school and higher education or employment, often with reduced access to established peer networks and growing distance from parental oversight. The data suggest this transitional period may leave young people especially vulnerable when facing online harms, with neither childhood support structures nor adult networks fully available.

Online anonymous communities showed a sharp spike at ages 22 to 25, reaching 15.1% compared with 5 to 7% in other age groups. This pattern suggests that young adults who have moved beyond school-based social networks may turn to anonymous online communities as a substitute source of peer support. The rise of Reddit and similar platforms as informal support spaces for young adults merits attention from those designing digital safety interventions.

Urban-Rural Differences

The urban-rural divide in help-seeking patterns challenges assumptions about the isolation of rural communities. Rural youth reported stronger family-based support networks than their urban counterparts.

Among rural respondents, 39.0% reported turning to parents when facing negative online experiences, compared with 26.9% of those in metro areas and 28.5% in other urban areas. Friends were also cited more frequently by rural youth (36.7%) than by metro youth (32.1%). Most strikingly, rural youth were far less likely to report telling no one: 8.5% compared with 16.6% in metro areas.

These patterns suggest that rural communities may retain stronger informal support networks that facilitate disclosure and help-seeking. Metro youth, despite greater access to formal services, appear more likely to navigate online harms alone. Helpline usage showed a modest rural advantage: 12.3% of rural youth reported using helplines or counsellors compared with 9.2% in metro areas. This may reflect targeted outreach efforts in rural areas or different patterns of awareness and trust in formal services.

AI chatbot usage showed the opposite pattern, with metro youth at 6.7% compared with 5.1% in rural areas.

The Silence of "No One"

The 14.5% of respondents who reported telling no one about their negative online experiences represent a population of particular concern. These young people face digital harms without interpersonal support, potentially processing difficult experiences in isolation.

The demographic profile of non-disclosure reveals important patterns. Males were more likely than females to tell no one (16.8% versus 13.0%), as were metro residents compared with rural youth (16.6% versus 8.5%). Understanding why young people choose not to disclose requires attention to both individual and structural factors. Shame, minimisation of experiences, fear of consequences such as device confiscation or restricted internet access, and lack of trust in available support all likely contribute. For some, non-disclosure may reflect a genuine assessment that available support would be unhelpful or even harmful. Safety interventions must reckon with these barriers rather than simply encouraging disclosure.

AI chatbots as Support Channels 9.6

AI chatbots represent an emerging support pathway with distinctive characteristics. Available 24/7 without human judgment, chatbots may appeal to young people who prefer anonymous, on-demand support. The 6.4% uptake, while modest, is notable given the recent emergence of these tools. Age patterns suggest higher adoption among 14 to 16 year-olds (9.2%) and 22 to 25 year-olds (9.8%), with a notable dip at 17 to 18 (3.3%).

The potential and limitations of AI-based support deserve careful consideration. While chatbots can provide immediate, judgment-free responses, they lack the contextual understanding and genuine empathy of human support. They may be appropriate for information-seeking and emotional processing but inadequate for situations requiring nuanced guidance or intervention.

Implications for Support Infrastructure 9.7

The patterns documented in this chapter point toward several directions for strengthening support infrastructure for young people facing online harms.

First, the dominance of informal support networks suggests that empowering friends, parents, and siblings to provide effective support may be as important as expanding formal services. Digital literacy programmes for parents and peer-based support training could leverage existing trust relationships rather than attempting to redirect help-seeking toward professional channels.

Second, the isolation of the 17 to 18 age group and the elevated non-disclosure among metro youth and males suggests the need for targeted approaches. Anonymous support options, peer-based programmes, and school-to-college transition support may address gaps in existing networks.

Third, the emergence of AI chatbots as a support pathway, however modest, signals changing expectations about support availability and format. Young people increasingly expect on-demand, judgment-free support options. Formal services that require appointments, limited hours, or extensive personal disclosure may struggle to meet these expectations.

The chapter that follows examines what young people actually want to change about their digital environments, providing insight into their priorities for safer online spaces.
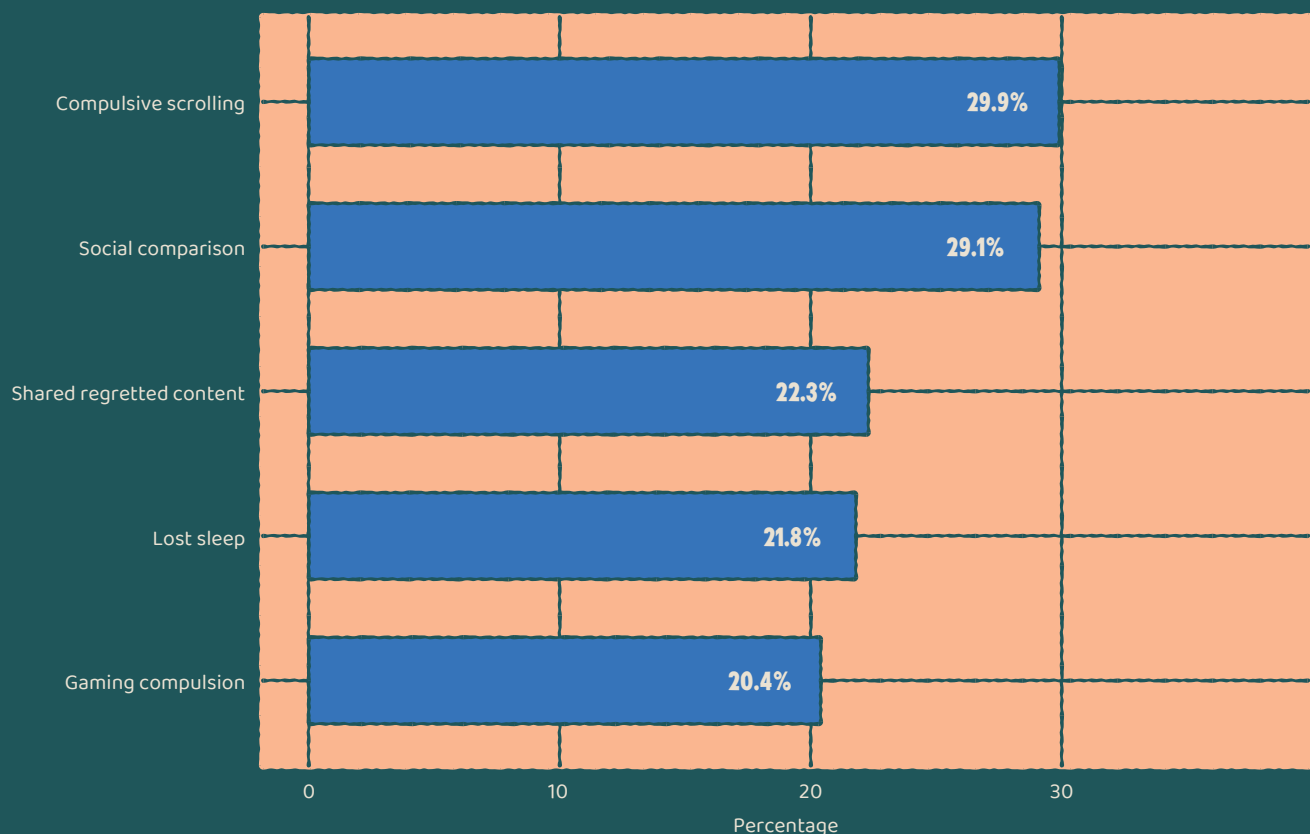
Digital Wellbeing

The relationship between digital engagement and psychological wellbeing represents one of the most debated topics in contemporary research on young people. The SCREEN survey provides insight into how young Indians experience the emotional dimensions of their online lives, as well as their capacity to use protective tools when needed. The findings reveal patterns that complicate simple narratives about technology's effects.

Problematic Digital Behaviours

Problematic Digital Behaviours　　　　　**% reporting each behaviour applies to them**

Behaviour	Percentage
Compulsive scrolling	29.9%
Social comparison	29.1%
Shared regretted content	22.3%
Lost sleep	21.8%
Gaming compulsion	20.4%

Percentage

The survey asked respondents to identify which of several problematic digital behaviours applied to them. The results reveal that the vast majority of young people experience at least one form of problematic engagement, with only 16.3% reporting that none of these behaviours apply to them.

Nearly 30% report compulsive scrolling, continuing to scroll even when they did not plan to (29.9%). An almost identical proportion (29.1%) report comparing their life or body to others online and feeling worse as a result. These two behaviours, compulsive engagement and negative social comparison, emerge as the most commonly reported problematic digital experiences among young Indians.

Over one-fifth of respondents (22.3%) have shared content online they later regretted, indicating that the disinhibition effect of digital communication leads many young people to disclose more than they intend. A similar proportion (21.6%) report staying up late or losing sleep due to online activity, with clear implications for health and daily functioning. Gaming compulsion, defined as finding it hard to stop playing even when needing to do other things, affects one in five respondents (20.3%).

Age Trajectories of Problematic Use 10.2

Gendered Patterns in Problematic Behaviour
Social comparison higher for females; gaming for males
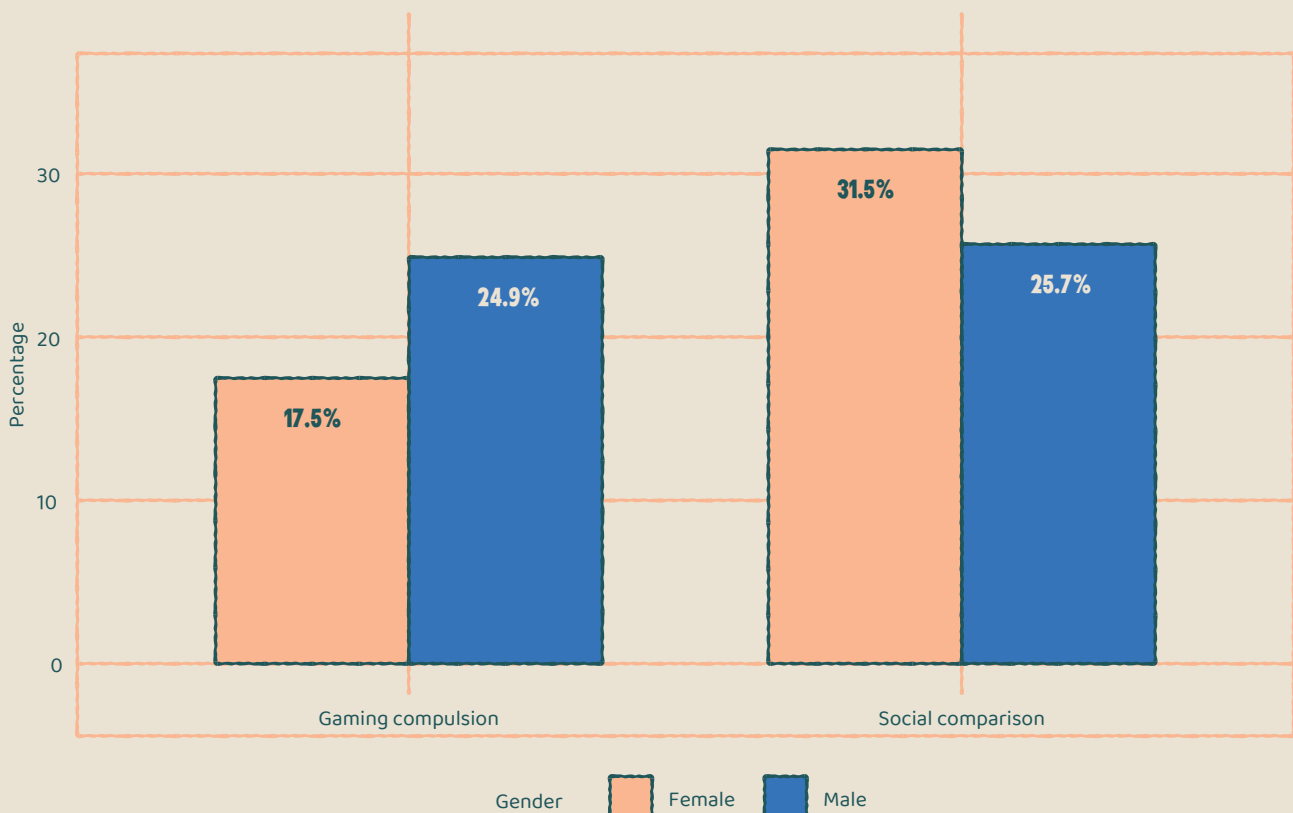
Age patterns reveal how problematic digital behaviours accumulate through adolescence and into young adulthood. The most striking finding is the proportion of respondents who reported that none of these behaviours applied to them: this figure drops dramatically from 41.9% among 11 to 13 year-olds to just 8.9% among 17 to 18 year-olds. By late adolescence, over 90% of young people experience at least one form of problematic digital engagement.

Compulsive scrolling increases steadily with age, rising from 28.7% at ages 11 to 13 to 40.5% at ages 25 to 30. This pattern suggests that scrolling behaviour becomes increasingly habitual over time, potentially reflecting both greater device access and deeper integration of social media into daily routines. The 17 to 18 age group shows an interesting dip to 19.4% before the behaviour rebounds, possibly reflecting the disruptions of educational transitions during this period.

Social comparison follows a different trajectory, peaking at ages 19 to 21 (37.6%) before declining to 24.1% by ages 25 to 30. The peak during emerging adulthood aligns with developmental research on identity formation, a period when young people are particularly attentive to social feedback and peer comparison as they establish adult identities (Arnett, 2000). The subsequent decline may reflect greater identity stability and reduced sensitivity to social comparison as young adults mature.

Sleep disruption from online activity follows a rising trajectory from 13.5% at ages 11 to 13 to 30.6% at ages 25 to 30. This pattern likely reflects increasing autonomy over bedtime routines, reduced parental monitoring, and the integration of devices into evening routines and leisure activities as people grow older.. The near-tripling of sleep disruption across the age span has significant implications for health, given the established links between sleep deprivation and physical and mental wellbeing.

Sharing content that is later regretted shows a sharp increase from 10.2% at ages 11 to 13 to 27.1% at ages 17 to 18, remaining elevated through young adulthood at approximately 25%. This pattern suggests that the combination of developing impulse control, increasing social media engagement, and heightened emotional intensity during adolescence creates conditions for regrettable disclosure.

Gender Patterns in Problematic Behaviour   10.3

Gender shapes the types of problematic digital behaviours young people experience, with patterns that align with broader research on gendered technology use and mental health vulnerabilities.

Females report higher rates of social comparison, with 31.5% comparing their life or body to others and feeling worse, compared with 25.7% of males, a difference of 5.8 percentage points.

Males report higher rates of gaming compulsion, with 24.9% finding it hard to stop playing games compared with 17.5% of females, a gap of 7.4 percentage points. Males also report higher rates of sharing content they later regret (24.5% versus 20.7%), possibly reflecting greater impulsivity or different social media use patterns.

Compulsive scrolling is slightly more common among males than females (33.1% versus 30.7%), while sleep disruption shows no gender difference at all (both 21.8%). Notably, females are more likely to report that none of these behaviours apply to them (18.9% versus 13.6%), suggesting that males may be slightly more susceptible to problematic digital engagement overall.

Urban-Rural Patterns in Problematic Behaviour 10.4

The urban-rural comparison reveals important differences in how digital engagement affects behaviour across different settings. Contrary to assumptions that urban youth face the greatest digital challenges, the patterns are more nuanced.

Rural youth report lower levels of problematic behaviours. Compulsive scrolling affects 27.4% of rural respondents compared with 31.3% of those in metros. Sharing content which respondents would later regret shows a particularly large gap: 14.4% in rural areas versus 24.1% in metros and 25.5% in other urban areas. A similar pattern is observed for sleep disruption, with lower rates in rural areas (15.8%) than in metropolitan areas (22.9%).

Emotional Responses to Extended Use 10.5

The survey had a section examining how young people feel after spending long hours online. The responses paint a picture of widespread negative emotional experiences following extended digital engagement.

One quarter of respondents (25.3%) report feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or experiencing fear of missing out (FOMO) after long online sessions. A similar proportion (24.6%) report feeling tired, irritated, or mentally exhausted. These responses suggest that extended digital engagement creates genuine psychological costs for many young people, even when the engagement itself may feel compelling or rewarding in the moment.

Guilt and regret about time spent online affects 23.0% of respondents, indicating that many young people experience a disconnect between their online behaviour and their own values or intentions. This finding aligns with research on self-regulation and technology use, where the gap between intended and actual use creates post-hoc negative affect (Hiniker et al., 2016).

Loneliness following extended online use affects 15.7% of respondents, a counterintuitive finding given that much online activity is ostensibly social. This pattern may reflect the qualitative difference between online and offline social connection, or may indicate that extended online use displaces more fulfilling forms of social engagement.

Only 11.8% report generally feeling fine or positive after extended use, while 11.0% report not noticing anything specific. Combined with the 18.4% who report not spending long hours online, this leaves approximately 60% of young people experiencing identifiable negative emotional responses to extended digital engagement.

Age and Emotional Response — 10.6

Emotional responses to extended online use vary substantially by age, with patterns that illuminate developmental differences in digital experience.

FOMO and anxiety peak sharply at ages 17 to 18 (31.8%), coinciding with the heightened social comparison and peer orientation characteristic of late adolescence.

Guilt about spending time online shows a dramatic increase from early to mid-adolescence: just 10.2% of 11 to 13 year-olds report guilt compared with 26.6% of 14 to 16 year-olds. This pattern suggests that early adolescence represents a critical window when awareness of problematic use develops, as young people begin to recognise the gap between their online behaviour and other priorities or values.

Mental exhaustion follows an interesting non-linear pattern, dipping to 15.7% at ages 17 to 18 before rebounding to 33.6% at ages 19 to 21. This may reflect different usage patterns across these life stages, with the 17 to 18 period potentially involving more social-focused, less cognitively demanding use, while the 19 to 21 period brings increased demands from higher education or employment alongside continued heavy digital engagement.

Gender and Emotional Response

Gender patterns in emotional response challenge some assumptions about differential vulnerability. Males report higher rates of FOMO and anxiety (27.9% versus 23.5%), a gap of 4.4 percentage points. Mental exhaustion shows minimal gender difference (26.0% female versus 25.7% male), as does guilt about online time (22.5% versus 23.6%). Loneliness similarly shows no meaningful gender gap (15.8% versus 16.6%). Females are more likely to report not noticing anything specific (12.7% versus 8.6%).

Urban-Rural Emotional Patterns

The urban-rural comparison for emotional responses reveals a more complex picture than the behavioural patterns might suggest. Rural youth report lower rates of FOMO and anxiety (14.4% versus approximately 28% in urban areas) and lower rates of guilt about online time (12.2% versus approximately 26%).

However, rural youth report higher rates of mental exhaustion (31.9% versus approximately 22% in urban areas). This pattern suggests that when rural youth do engage extensively with digital environments, the experience may be more cognitively taxing, possibly due to less familiarity with platform conventions, slower connections creating friction, or different types of content engagement.

Content Moderation Tool Literacy

The capacity to use protective tools represents a critical component of digital wellbeing. The survey examined whether young people find content reporting and moderation tools, such as blocking, filtering comments, and reporting posts, easy to use.

Only 37.1% of respondents report being able to use these tools effectively. A substantial proportion (21.0%) are entirely unaware that such tools exist. Among those aware, multiple barriers prevent effective use: 8.9% do not know how to use the tools, 8.0% find the reporting categories confusing and often cannot find options matching their concerns, and 6.7% hesitate to report content even when they know how. Around 10.0% believe that posts are only taken down if many people report simultaneously, reflecting skepticism about individual reporting power. Another 7.4% report that using these tools simply never crosses their mind.

Age Patterns in Tool Literacy 10.10

Tool literacy varies substantially by age, with patterns that partly contradict assumptions about digital native competence. Awareness of moderation tools improves with age: 37.0% of 11 to 13 year-olds are unaware of such tools compared with approximately 15% of those aged 19 and above.

However, effective use does not follow a simple age progression. The 17 to 18 age group shows the lowest rate of effective tool use at just 15.8%, despite having lower unawareness (10.7%) than younger cohorts. 10.12 Gender Differences in Tool Literacy Males report higher effective use of moderation tools at 39.2% compared with 35.5% for females. Females show higher rates of unawareness (22.0% versus 20.5%) and not knowing how to use tools (10.3% versus 7.4%). Males, however, show higher rates of finding reporting categories confusing (10.0% versus 5.6%).

Urban-Rural Tool Literacy 10.11

The urban-rural divide in tool literacy is pronounced. Metro respondents report effective use at 40.7% compared with just 29.0% for rural respondents. Rural youth show dramatically higher unawareness at 29.3% compared with 14.1% in metros, more than double the rate.

Respondents from towns and other urban areas show patterns similar to metros for effective use (40.8%) but intermediate unawareness (21.0%). The rural disadvantage in tool literacy has clear implications for digital safety interventions, which should prioritise not just awareness but practical skill-building in underserved areas.

Regional Tool Literacy 10.12

Regional variation in tool literacy is extreme. Southern respondents report the highest effective use at 60.3%, more than three times the rate in the North (20.1%). The Northeast shows 24.2% effective use while Central and Eastern regions show approximately 33% and 37%, respectively.

Northern respondents show distinctive patterns of barrier: 20.0% find reporting categories confusing (highest of any region), and 15.6% do not know how to use the tools. These patterns suggest that regional digital literacy initiatives should address different barriers in different areas.

Reporting Outcomes

Among respondents who have reported content online, outcomes varied considerably. Just over one-quarter (28.8%) report that their complaint was resolved or taken seriously. Around 19.0% of the respondents reported to have received explanations without resolution, and 18.4% found neither resolution nor any mechanism to follow up. A substantial 15.9% never checked outcomes or received updates, while 13.9% had never reported or blocked anything.

These figures suggest that platform reporting systems deliver satisfactory outcomes for only a minority of users who engage with them.

Cybercrime Helpline Awareness

Beyond platform tools, awareness of formal reporting channels provides insight into the broader support infrastructure available to young people. The survey examined familiarity with cybercrime reporting helplines such as 1930 and child helplines (1098/112).

Awareness of these services is relatively high: 58.5% know about them but have never reported complaints. Actual usage reaches 21.8%, while 19.7% are entirely unaware of these services.

Age Patterns in Helpline Usage

Helpline usage peaks sharply during late adolescence and young adulthood. Among 17 to 18 year-olds, 52.4% have used these services, the highest rate of any age group. The 19 to 21 group shows similarly high usage at 50.6%. Rates decline among older youth, falling to 39.8% at ages 22 to 25 and 21.6% at ages 25 to 30.

The high usage rates among 17 to 18 and 19 to 21 year-olds contrast with this group's low platform tool literacy and poor reporting outcomes. This pattern suggests that when young people in this vulnerable age window face serious harms, they may bypass platform mechanisms entirely in favour of external helplines, possibly reflecting awareness that platform tools have failed them.

Younger adolescents show lower helpline usage: 15.1% among 11 to 13 year-olds and 29.9% among 14 to 16 year-olds. This may reflect lower independent awareness of these services, parental mediation of serious concerns, or genuinely lower rates of harm requiring formal intervention.

Regional Helpline Usage

Regional variation in helpline usage is substantial. The North shows the highest usage at 42.2%, potentially reflecting targeted awareness campaigns or higher rates of harm requiring formal intervention. The Northeast shows 33.9% usage, while Central shows 24.0%.

Southern respondents show remarkably low helpline usage at just 8.7%, despite this region's high tool literacy (60.3% effective use). This pattern suggests that Southern youth may handle concerns through platform mechanisms rather than external channels.

Implications for Digital Wellbeing Interventions

The patterns documented in this chapter suggest several priorities for digital wellbeing interventions.

First, the 17 to 18 age group emerges as uniquely vulnerable across multiple dimensions: elevated FOMO and anxiety, lowest tool literacy, highest reporting category confusion, lowest complaint resolution rates, and highest helpline usage. Interventions targeting this transitional period should address both emotional wellbeing and practical tool skills.

Second, the substantial urban-rural gap in tool literacy (40.7% versus 29.0% effective use) and awareness (14.1% versus 29.3% unaware) indicates that rural digital literacy programmes should prioritise practical skill-building with moderation tools. Simply raising awareness is insufficient when nearly one-third of rural youth have never heard of these tools.

Third, the gender gap in tool literacy and reporting outcomes suggests that interventions should specifically target young women's capacity to use protective tools. The finding that females experience both higher rates of unwanted contact (Chapter 6) and lower tool effectiveness indicates a critical mismatch between need and capability.

Fourth, the low overall resolution rate for platform reports (28.8%) suggest that platforms must improve both responsiveness and feedback mechanisms. Young people will only invest effort in reporting if they believe it leads to meaningful action.

Fifth, the finding that only 11.8% feel generally fine after extended use suggests that platform design itself may be implicated in wellbeing outcomes. Interventions focused solely on individual behaviour change may be insufficient without corresponding attention to the design features that make extended engagement compelling yet ultimately unsatisfying.
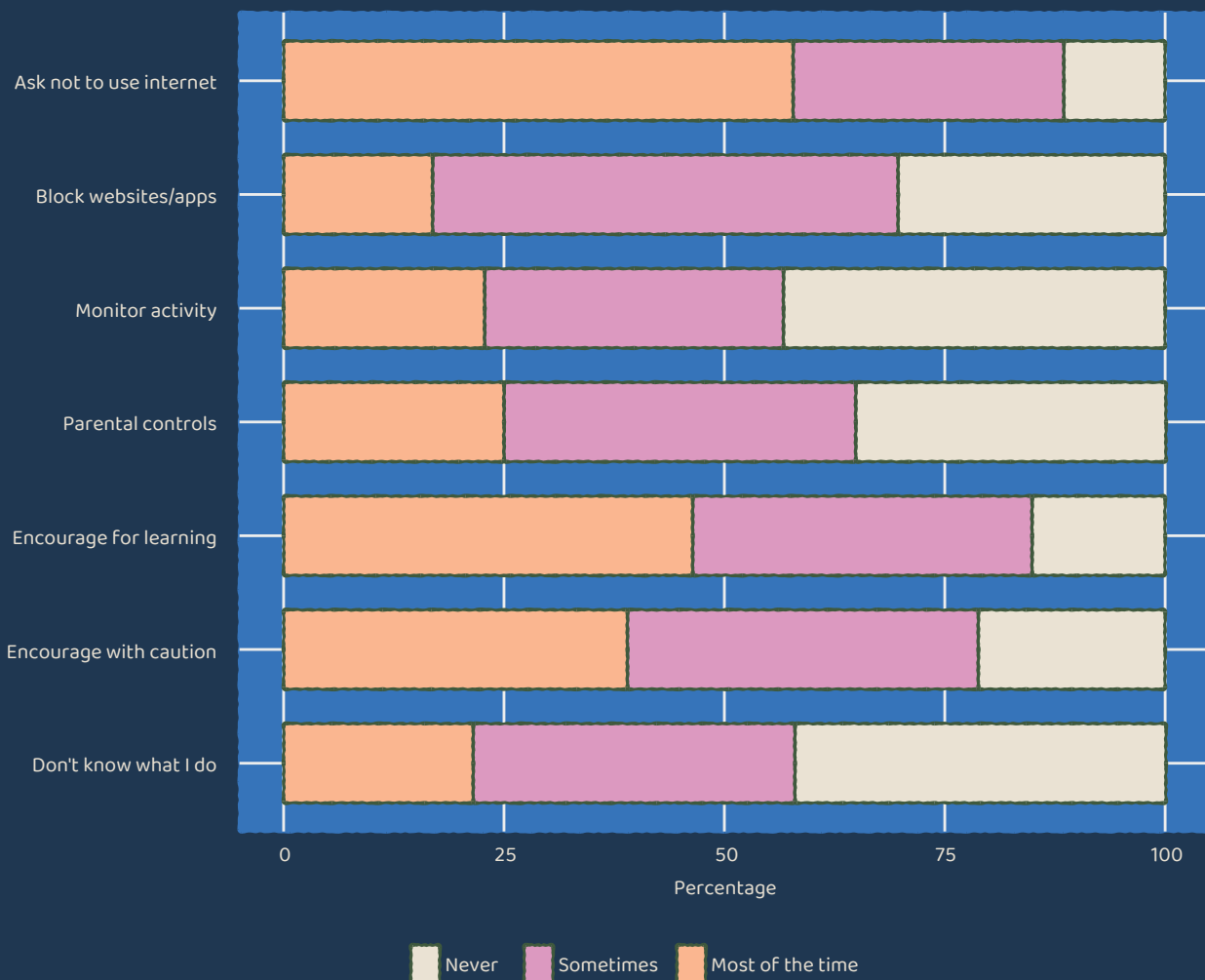
Parental Mediation

The role of parents in mediating young people's digital experiences has been extensively studied, with research distinguishing between restrictive mediation (rules and limits), active mediation (discussion and guidance), and technical mediation (monitoring and filtering tools) (Livingstone, 2015). The SCREEN survey captured how parents of young Indians aged 11 to 18 respond to their children's internet use, revealing a complex landscape where approaches vary substantially by age, gender, geography, and region.

Overview of Parental Approaches

Parental Mediation Behaviours (Ages 11–18)

N = 2,454

Legend: Never | Sometimes | Most of the time

X-axis: Percentage (0, 25, 50, 75, 100)

Categories: Ask not to use internet, Block websites/apps, Monitor activity, Parental controls, Encourage for learning, Encourage with caution, Don't know what I do

The survey asked respondents how often their parents engage in seven different mediation behaviours. Among 11 to 18 year-olds, the most common parental response is asking children not to use the internet, with 57.8% reporting this occurs most of the time and an additional 30.7% reporting it sometimes. Only 11.5% report their parents never make such requests. This high prevalence of restrictive messaging suggests that many Indian parents view internet use with significant caution.

Encouragement for learning-focused use is also widespread. Some 46.4% report parents encourage internet use for educational purposes most of the time, with 38.5% experiencing this sometimes. Similarly, 39.0% report that parents encourage use while asking them to be careful about online risks most of the time, with another 39.8% sometimes. These patterns suggest that many parents attempt to balance restriction with positive guidance.

Technical controls show more modest penetration. Website and app blocking occurs most of the time for only 16.9% of respondents, though 52.8% experience it sometimes and 30.3% never. Parental controls on phones or apps are present most of the time for 25.0%, sometimes for 39.9%, and never for 35.2%. Active monitoring of online activity occurs most of the time for 22.8%, sometimes for 33.9%, and never for 43.3%.

A notable finding concerns parental awareness. Some 21.5% of 11 to 18 year-olds report that their parents do not know what they do online most of the time, with an additional 36.5% sometimes. Only 42.1% report their parents never lack awareness of their online activities. This awareness gap has implications for the effectiveness of any mediation approach.

Age Patterns in Parental Mediation   11.2

Parental mediation strategies shift markedly as children move through adolescence, with patterns that reveal both increasing restriction and decreasing engagement.

Requests not to use the internet escalate dramatically with age. Among 11 to 13 year-olds, 32.3% report parents make such requests most of the time. This figure rises to 52.6% at ages 14 to 16 and reaches 75.5% among 17 to 18 year-olds. The trajectory suggests that as adolescents gain autonomy in other domains, parents may compensate by intensifying verbal discouragement of internet use.

However, this increase in verbal restriction is not matched by technical controls. Website and app blocking shows a more complex pattern: 48.4% of 11 to 13 year-olds report their parents never block content, compared with 33.2% at 14 to 16 and just 18.2% at 17 to 18. Parents appear to shift from either blocking or not blocking toward intermittent blocking as children age.

Active monitoring declines substantially through adolescence. Among 11 to 13 year-olds, 37.7% report parents never monitor their activity. This figure rises to 32.7% at 14 to 16 and jumps to 53.5% at 17 to 18. By late adolescence, the majority of young people report no active parental monitoring of their online activities, even as verbal restrictions intensify.

Perhaps most concerning is the decline in protective guidance. Among 11 to 13 year-olds, 51.0% report that parents encourage internet use while asking them to be careful about risks most of the time. This drops to 40.4% at 14 to 16 and falls further to 31.2% at 17 to 18. As young people approach adulthood and presumably face more complex online risks, they receive less rather than more risk-oriented guidance from parents.

The pattern that emerges is one of shifting from engaged mediation toward disengaged restriction. Younger adolescents experience more hands-on approaches combining monitoring with guidance. Older adolescents experience more verbal prohibition but less actual oversight or conversation about risks. This shift may reflect parental fatigue, recognition of adolescent autonomy, or simply the difficulty of monitoring increasingly independent young people.

Gender Differences in Parental Mediation   11.3

Gender shapes parental mediation in ways that align with broader patterns of gendered socialisation, with males facing more technical control and females receiving more communicative guidance.

Males experience more website and app blocking. Only 26.1% of males report their parents never block content, compared with 35.2% of females, a gap of 9.1 percentage points. Males also experience more parental controls on phones: 31.3% never have controls compared with 40.0% of females, an 8.7 percentage point difference. Active monitoring shows a similar pattern, with 25.2% of males monitored most of the time compared with 19.8% of females.

These patterns may reflect parental perceptions that sons require more oversight, perhaps due to concerns about gaming, pornography, or other content perceived as particularly risky for boys. Research on parental mediation has documented that parents often apply stricter controls to sons based on assumptions about male vulnerability to certain online harms (Livingstone et al., 2015).

Females, by contrast, receive more communicative and protective mediation. Some 42.8% of females report that parents encourage internet use while asking about risks most of the time, compared with 34.7% of males, a gap of 8.1 percentage points.

This pattern suggests that parents engage in more dialogue-based guidance with daughters, perhaps reflecting assumptions that girls are more receptive to conversation or face different risks requiring discussion rather than technical blocking.

Parents also demonstrate greater awareness of daughters' online activities. Among females, 45.1% report their parents never lack knowledge of their activities, compared with 38.9% of males, a 6.3 percentage point gap. This may reflect closer parent-daughter communication patterns, different expectations about disclosure, or less active concealment by daughters.

Urban-Rural Differences   11.4

The urban-rural divide in parental mediation reveals strikingly different approaches, with rural parents using fewer technical interventions but more communicative guidance.

Rural parents are substantially less likely to use technical controls. Some 46.1% of rural youth report parents never block websites or apps, compared with 27.4% in metros, a difference of nearly 19 percentage points. Similarly, 50.2% of rural youth report parents never have parental controls installed, compared with 31.9% in metros. However, rural parents show more protective communication. Some 51.5% of rural youth report parents encourage use while asking about risks most of the time, compared with 36.0% in metros, a gap of 15.5 percentage points. Rural parents are also less likely to simply ask children not to use the internet: 37.9% do so most of the time compared with 62.3% in metros.

This pattern may reflect differential digital literacy among parents. Metro parents may have greater familiarity with technical tools and platform settings, enabling them to implement controls. Rural parents, who may have less direct experience with digital environments, may rely more on verbal guidance and trust-based approaches. Alternatively, rural family structures with closer intergenerational ties may make communicative approaches more natural and effective.

Rural parents also demonstrate greater awareness of their children's online activities. Some 51.3% of rural youth report their parents never lack knowledge of what they do online, compared with 41.0% in metros. This may reflect the closer family structures and smaller social worlds of rural communities, where children's activities are more visible and subject to informal community observation.

Mediation Effectiveness Considerations 11.5

The available evidence raises questions about the effectiveness of different mediation approaches. Purely restrictive strategies, characterised by asking children not to use the internet without accompanying guidance or technical controls, may have limited impact. The finding that 75.5% of 17 to 18 year-olds report parents asking them not to use the internet most of the time, yet this age group shows elevated harm exposure and wellbeing challenges documented in earlier chapters, suggests that verbal restriction alone is insufficient.

The decline in active monitoring and protective guidance through adolescence appears mismatched with risk exposure. As young people face increasingly complex online environments, they receive less rather than more parental engagement. The finding in Chapter 6 that 17 to 18 year-olds show the highest rates of known-person unwanted contact (53.1%) coincides with this age group reporting the lowest rates of parental risk-oriented guidance and the highest rates of parental unawareness.

Research on parental mediation consistently finds that active mediation through discussion and co-use is associated with better outcomes than restrictive mediation alone (Livingstone, 2015). The SCREEN findings suggest that many Indian parents may be moving in the opposite direction as children age, shifting from engaged approaches toward disengaged restriction.

Implications for Family Interventions 11.6

The patterns documented in this chapter suggest several priorities for family-focused digital safety initiatives.

First, interventions should encourage parents to stay communicative and engaged with their children through adolescence, rather than relying on restrictions in place of guidance.. The sharp decline in risk-oriented conversation from early adolescence to late adolescence represents a missed opportunity. Parents need support in adapting their approaches as children mature, maintaining dialogue even as they necessarily grant greater autonomy.

Second, the gender gap in mediation approaches deserves attention. The pattern of control for sons and conversation for daughters may not serve either group optimally. Interventions that help parents engage sons in dialogue rather than surveillance, and help daughters develop technical self-protection skills, could improve outcomes for both.

The effectiveness of any approach is closely shaped by socio-cultural contexts, access, and family dynamics, making it important to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. At its core, this finding underscores the importance of meaningfully involving parents in online safety initiatives and equipping them with the knowledge and confidence to engage in informed, ongoing conversations with their children, thereby strengthening intergenerational communication around digital safety and well-being. The chapter that follows examines the linguistic landscape of young people's digital communication, providing insight into the cultural dimensions of online life that parents and educators must navigate.

Internet Slang and Digital Literacy

Language evolves rapidly in digital spaces, with young people creating, adopting, and abandoning terminology at speeds that can leave older generations bewildered. The SCREEN survey included an open-ended question asking respondents to share internet slang they believe is not widely known, providing a window into the linguistic landscape of young Indian digital culture and revealing important dimensions of digital literacy.

Why Internet Slang Matters

Internet slang serves multiple functions beyond simple communication efficiency. It operates as a marker of in-group membership, signalling familiarity with particular platforms, communities, and cultural moments (Eisenstein, 2013). Young people who deploy slang correctly demonstrate their embeddedness in digital culture, while those unfamiliar with current terminology may find themselves excluded from conversations or misunderstanding content they encounter.

From a safety perspective, slang literacy matters because potentially harmful content often employs coded language that evades content moderation systems and parental oversight. Understanding the linguistic landscape helps educators, parents, and policymakers interpret what young people are actually discussing and identify concerning trends before they become widespread problems.

For practitioners working on digital safety, slang represents a moving target that requires ongoing attention. Terms that are novel today become mainstream within months and may be replaced by newer vocabulary. This dynamism means that static educational resources quickly become outdated, and intervention programs must build in mechanisms for continuous updating.

Patterns in Respondent Contributions

The open-ended slang question generated diverse responses, though analysis reveals interesting patterns. The most common actual slang terms contributed include FOMO (fear of missing out) at 2.6%, Rizz (charisma or charm) at 1.7%, YOLO (you only live once) at 0.6%, and LOL (laugh out loud) at 0.9%. These terms represent different vintages of internet culture, with LOL dating to early internet communication while Rizz emerged only recently through TikTok culture.

Newer additions to the lexicon appear in smaller percentages but reveal emerging trends. Terms like Aura (personal energy or vibe, sometimes casually referred to as aura points when young people say that someone has lost aura points or gained aura points based on how they are behaving), Delulu (delusional, often about romantic prospects), Skibidi (from a viral video series, often used as absurdist humour), GRWM (get ready with me which isa video content format where creators talk about random life updates while getting ready on camera), Sybau (shut your bitch ass up), and Pookie (term of endearment) represent current circulation among young Indian users.

Some contributions reflect specifically Indian digital culture. Terms like "BT mat de" (don't give a bad trip, loosely translating to don't stress me out or spoil the mood) blend Hindi with English slang conventions.

Awareness Gaps and Response Patterns — 12.3

Notably, many respondents indicated uncertainty about slang. Responses suggest that a substantial minority either do not engage with slang-heavy communities or do not perceive their vocabulary as noteworthy slang. This finding indicates varying depths of immersion in digital youth culture.

Gender patterns in slang awareness show modest differences. Males reported higher rates of not knowing slang at 10.1% compared to females at 6.2%, possibly reflecting different platform usage or communication styles. The urban-rural divide appears more pronounced, with rural respondents showing higher levels of being uncertain about their knowledge of what are internet slangs, at 13.5% compared to metros at 5.3%.

Categories of Contemporary Slang — 12.4

The contributed terms can be organised into several functional categories that illuminate how young people use language online.

Emotional and social states include terms like FOMO, Rizz, Aura, and Delulu. These terms provide efficient vocabulary for discussing complex social dynamics, from the anxiety of missing experiences to the self-aware acknowledgment of unrealistic hopes. The popularity of such terms suggests that young people actively discuss and reflect on their emotional experiences in digital spaces.

Respondents referred to specific content formats and practices—such as GRWM ("Get Ready With Me"), POV (point of view), and other recognisable video styles.. These terms reflect the creator culture that dominates platforms like Instagram and YouTube, where understanding content conventions is essential for both consumption and participation.

Intensifiers and reactions include various forms of LOL (Laughing out loud), LMAO (laughing my ass off), and newer variants. These serve the practical function of conveying emotional tone in text-based communication, addressing the absence of vocal and facial cues that convey meaning in face-to-face interaction.

Platform-specific terminology includes gaming terms like GG (good game), bot (unskilled player), and noob (novice), reflecting the types of internet slang which has become a significant part of the gaming culture among young Indians. Terms from specific communities like Sigma (referring to masculine archetypes) reveal engagement with particular ideological currents circulating online.

Implications for Digital Safety Education 12.5

The slang landscape has direct implications for those designing digital safety interventions. Educational materials that use outdated terminology risk losing credibility with young audiences who may dismiss content as irrelevant or out of touch. Conversely, forced use of current slang can appear inauthentic and counterproductive.

The finding that many young people are themselves uncertain about slang suggests that peer-based education may be more effective than top-down instruction. Conversations that engage young people as experts in their own digital culture, asking them to explain terminology and practices, may achieve better outcomes than adult-designed curricula that attempt to speak the youth language.

For parents and teachers seeking to understand young people's digital lives, the slang question offers a non-threatening entry point for conversation. Asking young people to explain terms they encounter can open dialogue about platforms, communities, and content without triggering defensive responses to direct questioning about behaviour.

A Slang Reference for Readers 12.6

For readers unfamiliar with current internet terminology, the following brief glossary may assist in understanding young people's digital communication. This list represents a snapshot in time and will inevitably become outdated.

TERM	MEANING
Aura	Someone's perceived personal energy or charisma, sometimes discussed as points that can be gained or lost through actions
BRB	Be right back; a classic term for temporary absence
Cap	Lying or false (as in "no cap" meaning "no lie" or "for real")
Delulu	Abbreviation of "delusional," typically regarding romantic prospects or self-perception
Drip	Stylish clothing or fashion sense
Finsta	Fake Instagram account, typically private, for sharing authentic content with close friends
FOMO	Fear of missing out; anxiety about others' experiences
FR	For real; emphasising sincerity
GOAT	Greatest of all time
GRWM	Get ready with me; a video format showing preparation routines
Highkey	Very much or openly
L	Loss; used to evaluate situations negatively
Lowkey	Somewhat or secretly
Mog	Dominating or outperforming others in attractiveness
No cap	Truthfully or honestly
OG	Original gangster; meaning authentic or original
Pookie	A term of endearment
Rizz	Charm or flirting ability, derived from "charisma"
Sigma	A masculine archetype of independence
Skibidi	Originates from a viral video series; often used absurdly
Slaps	Describes something excellent, especially music
Slay	To succeed impressively
Stan	Combines "stalker" and "fan" to mean an obsessive admirer
Sus	Suspicious; popularised by the game Among Us
Sybau	Shut your bitch ass up
Vibe check	An assessment of mood or energy
W	Win; used to evaluate situations positively
YOLO	You only live once; justifying spontaneous action

The Living Language of Digital Youth

The rapid evolution of internet slang reflects broader dynamics of digital culture, including the pursuit of in-group identity, the creativity of young linguistic innovators, and the speed at which cultural products circulate through global platforms. For those working with young people on digital safety, maintaining awareness of this evolving vocabulary is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for effective communication and intervention.

Understanding slang also reveals something deeper about young people's digital experiences. The terms they create and adopt reflect what matters to them: social status and charisma, emotional states and anxieties, community membership and exclusion. Paying attention to this linguistic layer provides insight into the lived experience of growing up online that quantitative measures alone cannot capture.

Safety by Design

The concept of safety by design shifts responsibility for online safety from individual users to the platforms and systems that shape digital experiences. Rather than expecting young people to navigate hostile environments through personal vigilance alone, this approach asks: how might platforms be designed differently to reduce harm while preserving the benefits of digital connection? The SCREEN survey captured young people's own visions for safer digital spaces through an open-ended question asking what one thing they would change about the internet.

The Safety by Design Framework

Safety by design emerged from recognition that platform architecture profoundly influences user behaviour and exposure to harm (Livingstone et al., 2024). Features like infinite scroll, algorithmic amplification of engaging content, and frictionless sharing can inadvertently promote harmful outcomes even when individual actors have no malicious intent. Conversely, thoughtful design choices such as friction for sensitive actions (such as deliberately adding small barriers or pauses before a user can complete an action that could have negative consequences), clear reporting pathways, and graduated responses can create environments where safety becomes the default rather than the exception.
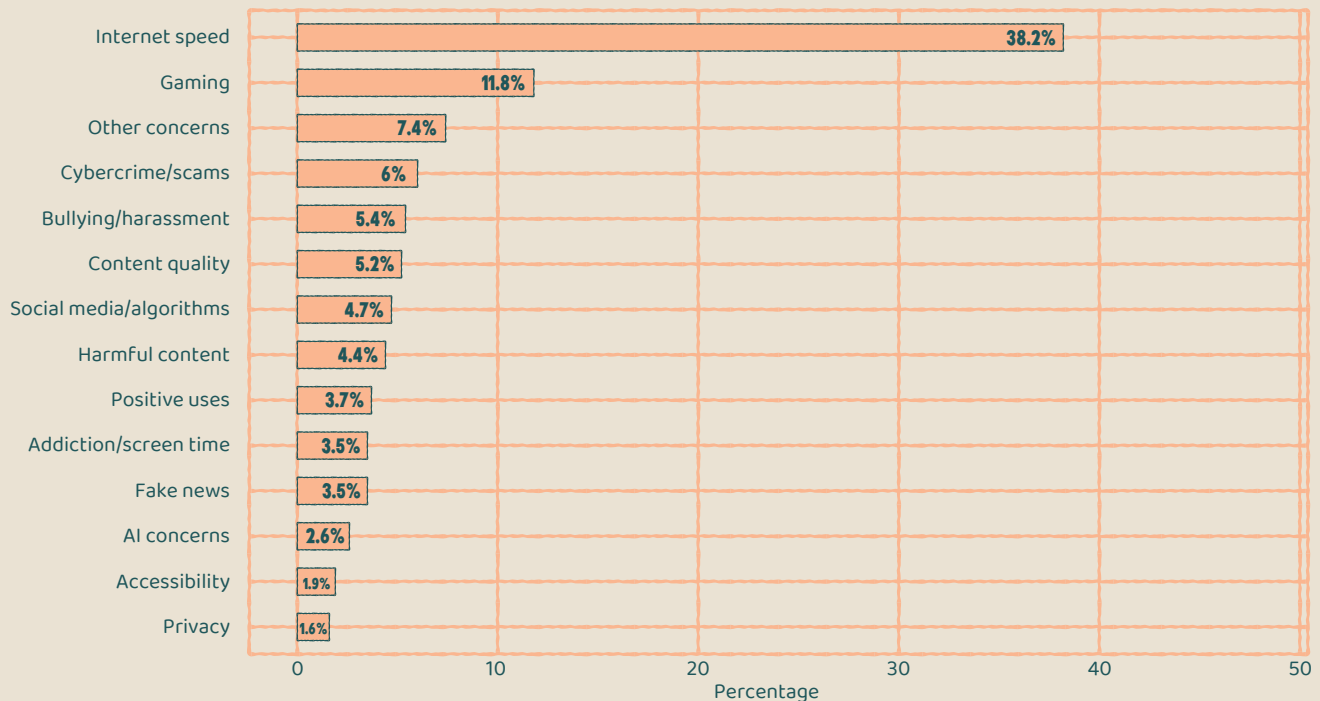
This approach does not absolve individuals of responsibility but acknowledges the asymmetry between platform designers with sophisticated resources and individual users, particularly young people, navigating complex systems.

The Indian context presents particular considerations. With one of the world's largest and fastest-growing internet user populations, design choices by global platforms have outsized impact. Yet the diversity of Indian users across languages, regions, and contexts means that design solutions must accommodate substantial heterogeneity rather than assuming uniform user needs.

What Young People Would Change About the Internet
Themes from open−ended responses (n = 1,214 categorizable)

Theme	Percentage
Internet speed	38.2%
Gaming	11.8%
Other concerns	7.4%
Cybercrime/scams	6%
Bullying/harassment	5.4%
Content quality	5.2%
Social media/algorithms	4.7%
Harmful content	4.4%
Positive uses	3.7%
Addiction/screen time	3.5%
Fake news	3.5%
AI concerns	2.6%
Accessibility	1.9%
Privacy	1.6%

Percentage

The survey asked respondents: "If there is one thing you could change about the internet as it is today, what would it be?" Of 3,907 respondents, 2,841 (71.9%) provided a response. Among these, 66.0% offered substantive suggestions expressing specific concerns or desired changes. The multilingual responses, spanning English, Hindi in Roman script, and regional languages, reveal priorities that both confirm and challenge assumptions about young people's digital concerns.

Among the 1,214 substantive, categorisable responses, internet speed and connectivity emerged as the dominant concern at 38.2%. This finding underscores that for many young Indians, basic infrastructure remains the primary barrier to positive digital experience. Before concerns about content, safety, or design can be meaningfully addressed, reliable access must be established. This infrastructure priority has implications for policy, suggesting that safety interventions may have limited impact where connectivity itself remains unreliable.

[3] Given the multilingual nature of responses (English, Hindi in Roman script, and Kannada), we employed a keyword-based thematic classification approach rather than machine learning methods, which would require extensive training data across languages. The classification process involved:

1. Initial exploration: Word frequency analysis across all valid responses to identify recurring themes and terminology;
2. Pattern development: Creation of regular expression patterns capturing both English terms and romanised Hindi equivalents (e.g., "fake news" and "galat jankari" both mapping to misinformation); 3. Hierarchical classification: Responses matched against patterns in priority order, with more specific categories taking precedence over general ones; 4. Non-substantive filtering: Identification and separation of responses that did not provide actionable input (e.g., "don't know," "nhi pta," single characters)

Themes that emerged in the analysis are described in the Appendix 2.

Gaming-related concerns ranked second at 11.8%, encompassing requests for new games, concerns about gaming addiction, and platform-specific issues with popular titles like PUBG, Free Fire, and Roblox. This prominence reflects the significant role of gaming in young Indian digital culture, particularly among males and certain age groups.

Cybercrime, scams, and fraud made up 6.0% of responses, encompassing issues such as online fraud, hacking, financial scams, betting apps, and blackmail, as well as demands for stronger punishment for offenders.. Bullying, harassment, and hate speech concerns followed at 5.4%, encompassing trolling, discrimination, toxic behaviour, body shaming, and cancel culture. Respondents expressed desire for kinder online interactions and more effective responses to harassment.

Content quality and moderation concerns reached 5.2%, with requests for better filtering, removal of low-quality content, improved moderation systems, and more effective reporting mechanisms.

Harmful or inappropriate content concerned 4.4% of respondents, specifically addressing sexual content, pornography, violent material, and age-inappropriate content that remains easily accessible. Addiction and screen time concerns reached 3.5%, with requests for usage limits, screen time controls, and recognition of internet addiction as a genuine problem. Fake news and misinformation similarly concerned 3.5%, addressing false information, rumours, and difficulty distinguishing reliable from unreliable sources.

Emerging concerns about AI reached 2.6%, addressing AI-generated content, deepfakes, AI misuse, and the proliferation of synthetic media. Accessibility and affordability concerned 1.9%, with requests for free or cheaper internet access and attention to cost barriers. Privacy and data protection, often assumed to be a primary youth concern, ranked lowest among categorised themes at just 1.6%.

Gender Differences in Desired Changes 13.3

Gender shapes what young people want to change about the internet in ways that reflect differential online experiences and vulnerabilities documented throughout this report.

Females show notably higher concern about bullying, harassment, and hate speech at 6.8% compared with 3.5% for males, nearly double the rate. Females also express greater concern about fake news and misinformation at 4.3% versus 2.5%, potentially reflecting heightened awareness of how misinformation affects issues of particular salience to women, including health information and gender-based narratives.

Males show higher interest in content moderation and quality at 7.5% versus 4.4%, gaming-related concerns at 13.3% versus 10.7%, and harmful or inappropriate content at 5.3% versus 4.3%. The gaming emphasis aligns with higher male gaming engagement and the elevated gaming compulsion documented in Chapter 9 (24.9% of males versus 17.5% of females). These gender patterns suggest that platform improvements should address different priorities for different users. Features targeting harassment and unwanted contact may be particularly valued by female users, while content quality improvements and gaming-related features may resonate more with males.

Age Patterns in Desired Changes — 13.4

Age-related patterns reveal distinct developmental concerns and digital experiences across life stages, with implications for how safety by design should be implemented for different age groups.

The youngest respondents, aged 11 to 13, stand out dramatically from older groups. Their top concerns are cybercrime, scams, and fraud at 21.6% followed by bullying, harassment, and hate speech at 13.4%, while internet speed barely registers at 5.2%. This pattern likely reflects recent digital safety education in schools, which emphasises these risks, as well as genuine vulnerability during early internet exposure. The salience of safety concerns among this age group suggests that educational messaging is reaching young users, though it may also indicate heightened anxiety about online risks that could benefit from reassurance alongside awareness.

The 14 to 16 age group shows a transitional pattern. Internet speed becomes more prominent at 32.0% while safety concerns remain elevated, with cybercrime and harassment each at approximately 7.8%. By ages 17 to 18, internet speed dominates overwhelmingly at 61.5%, with gaming concerns also elevated at 15.4%. Strikingly, this age group shows the lowest concern about bullying and harassment at just 0.7%, possibly indicating normalisation of online negativity, greater coping capacity, or reduced exposure as users curate their online environments more effectively. However, given this age group's elevated harm exposure and help-seeking isolation documented in earlier chapters, the low expressed concern may reflect resignation rather than genuine safety.

Young adults aged 19 to 21 report the highest levels of gaming-related concerns (20.6%), coinciding with peak levels of gaming engagement.

Urban-Rural Differences in Priorities — 13.5

Geographic differences in desired changes reflect the digital divide's continuing influence on user priorities while also revealing unexpected patterns.

Internet speed and connectivity concerns are remarkably consistent across urban-rural categories, ranging from 35.2% in other urban areas to 39.8% in rural areas. This parity contradicts assumptions that connectivity would be distinctly a rural concern. Even in metropolitan areas, internet infrastructure fails to meet user expectations, or speed concerns are universal regardless of baseline connectivity. This finding suggests that infrastructure investment remains a national rather than rural-specific priority. North India shows the highest concern about internet speed and connectivity at 46.1% and gaming at 14.0%, while showing relatively lower concern about social harms like bullying and harassment at 4.1%. The emphasis on infrastructure and entertainment concerns may reflect both genuine connectivity challenges in parts of the region and the sample's demographic profile.

The most striking urban-rural difference appears in gaming-related concerns, where other urban areas show dramatically elevated concern at 18.3% compared with 8.5% in metros and 8.8% in rural areas. This pattern may reflect gaming's particular popularity in smaller cities and towns, where other entertainment options may be more limited and where gaming cafes and competitive gaming scenes often flourish.

Rural respondents show elevated concern about cybercrime, scams, and fraud at 8.8% versus 6.4% in metros, possibly reflecting greater vulnerability due to lower digital literacy or targeted scam campaigns in rural regions. Conversely, rural youth show notably lower concern about bullying and harassment at 1.8% versus 6.1% in metros. This gap may indicate lower exposure, different social dynamics in closer-knit communities, or underreporting due to different norms around discussing harassment. The finding aligns with rural youth's stronger informal support networks documented in Chapter 8, which may provide protective factors against or responses to harassment that reduce its salience as a concern.

Connecting Findings to Design Priorities 13.6

The desired changes expressed by respondents connect directly to safety by design principles and the harm patterns documented throughout this report.

The prominence of cybercrime and scam concerns, particularly among younger adolescents and rural youth, suggests demand for design features that make fraudulent content more identifiable and harder to distribute. Warning labels on suspicious links, verification indicators for legitimate accounts and businesses, and friction-introducing steps before financial transactions could address these concerns. The finding in Chapter 9 that only 37.1% can use reporting tools effectively suggests that making fraud reporting simpler and more intuitive would also help.

Bullying and harassment concerns, elevated among females and in Southern and Western regions, point toward improved blocking, muting, and reporting features. The gender gap in reporting outcomes documented in Chapter 9, where males show 35.2% resolution compared with 21.6% for females, suggests that current systems may be less effective at addressing the types of harassment females experience. Design improvements might include harassment-specific reporting categories, proactive detection of abusive patterns, and more transparent communication about report outcomes.

Content quality and moderation concerns suggest demand for user agency over algorithmic feeds. The criticism of reels, trends, and algorithmically promoted content indicates that some users want alternatives to engagement-optimised content delivery. Features allowing users to opt into chronological feeds, limit certain content types, or reduce algorithmic personalisation could address these concerns.

Addiction and screen time concerns, though representing only 3.5% of responses, align with the widespread problematic digital behaviours documented in Chapter 9, where 29.9% report compulsive scrolling and only 16.3% report no problematic behaviours. The difference between the proportion experiencing these issues and the proportion prioritising them as areas for change suggests that, although many struggle with compulsive use, they may not view platform design as the primary solution.. This finding supports safety by design approaches that implement usage support by default rather than requiring users to recognise and address the problem themselves.

The low prioritisation of privacy concerns at 1.6% contrasts with privacy's prominence in global digital rights discourse. This finding may indicate that Indian youth have lower privacy awareness, have become resigned to data collection, or prioritise other concerns more urgently. Alternatively, privacy may be experienced as abstract compared with the concrete harms of harassment, scams, or poor connectivity.

Implications for Platform Design 13.7

The findings suggest several priorities in India.

First, investment in infrastructure and performance remains essential. The dominance of speed concerns across demographics indicates that user experience fundamentals must be addressed before more sophisticated safety features can be appreciated. Platforms that perform poorly on basic metrics like load time and reliability may find that users have little bandwidth for engaging with safety tools.

Second, demographic tailoring of safety features could improve relevance and uptake. Harassment-focused tools may need particular prominence for female users and in Southern and Western regions. Fraud-protection features may need emphasis for rural users and younger adolescents. Gaming-related safety features may resonate most in other urban areas and with male users. There is a need for different tools based on user context since safety needs aren't uniform.

Third, the age-specific patterns suggest different design approaches for different life stages. Younger adolescents may benefit from more visible safety warnings and educational content integrated into platform experience. The 17 to 18 age group's combination of high harm exposure, low help-seeking, and low expressed safety concern suggests a need for proactive rather than reactive safety features that do not require users to recognise and report problems.

Fourth, the low resolution rates for reports documented in Chapter 9 point to limitations not only in reporting interfaces but also in how reports are followed up. Young people are more likely to engage with reporting processes when they perceive them as leading to meaningful outcomes.

Finally, the emergence of AI concerns at 2.6%, though modest, signals a growing awareness that will likely increase as AI-generated content becomes more prevalent. Proactive labelling of AI-generated content, tools for detecting synthetic media, and clear policies on AI use could position platforms ahead of user concerns rather than responding reactively.

Conclusion 13.3

The safety by design agenda requires translating user concerns into platform action. The SCREEN findings reveal that young Indians want faster, more reliable internet; protection from scams and fraud; kinder online environments with less harassment; higher quality content; and tools to manage their own usage. These desires vary by gender, age, geography, and region in ways that demand tailored rather than uniform responses.

Platforms that respond to these expressed preferences while also implementing protections that users may not explicitly request, such as privacy safeguards and proactive harm detection, can create digital environments that better serve young Indian users. The alternative, continuing to optimise for engagement while externalising safety costs onto users, will increasingly face regulatory pressure, reputational risk, and user abandonment as alternatives emerge.

Appendix: Methodology

This chapter explains how the SCREEN survey was designed, who participated, and how we adjusted the data to make findings representative of Indian youth more broadly. Understanding methodology matters because it shapes how confidently readers can interpret findings and apply them to their own contexts. We have written this chapter to be accessible to general readers while providing sufficient technical detail for researchers who wish to evaluate our approach.

Survey Design and Administration

The SCREEN (Student Cyber Resilience Education and Empowerment Nationwide) survey was administered online during 2025. The instrument was available in three languages: English, Hindi, and Kannada. This language selection balanced broad reach (Hindi is understood by approximately 57% of Indians, while English serves as an educational and professional lingua franca). A substantial proportion of participants were from Delhi NCR, Karnataka and Rajasthan, states where the Digital Champions programme was being actively implemented at the time, making the inclusion of Hindi, English, and Kannada particularly relevant to the study population.

Question formats varied by domain. Single-response items captured categorical information such as age group, gender, and area type. Multiple-response items allowed respondents to select all applicable options for questions like platform usage or types of harm experienced. Open-ended questions captured qualitative responses on topics like internet slang knowledge and desired platform changes. Key measures used established response formats validated in prior research: harm exposure items offered five-point responses (Yes, I have / Yes, someone I know has / No / Not sure / I don't know), enabling distinction between direct experience and proximate awareness. Parental mediation items used three-point frequency scales (Most of the time / Sometimes / Never) following conventions in the parental mediation literature (Kirwil, 2009).

Sampling Context and Participant Characteristics

The survey collected 3,907 valid responses from young people aged 11 to 30 across 20 Indian states. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were recruited through multiple channels associated with youth digital safety programming, including networks established through the **YLAC Digital Champions Program**.

This sampling approach merits explicit discussion. The survey reached participants through channels connected to digital safety education initiatives, meaning respondents may have above-average awareness of online safety issues compared with the general youth population. Additionally, the sample includes a significant proportion of respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and schools serving economically disadvantaged communities, reflecting the populations served by partner programmes. This is a conscious methodological choice: these populations are often underrepresented in digital research yet face distinctive patterns of access, risk, and support. However, readers should bear this context in mind when interpreting findings.

Age Distribution

The weighted age distribution shows representation across adolescence and young adulthood. Respondents aged 11 to 13 years comprise 9.8% of the weighted sample (n=611 raw responses). Those aged 14 to 16 years comprise 13.3% (n=731). The 17 to 18 age group comprises 13.5% (n=1,092). Young adults aged 19 to 21 comprise 22.0% (n=760), while those aged 22 to 25 comprise 15.3% (n=484). The oldest group, aged 25 to 30, comprises 26.1% (n=229).

The relatively smaller raw sample sizes for the oldest age group (n=229) and youngest age group (n=611) mean that subgroup analyses for these populations should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The 17 to 18 age group shows the largest raw sample (n=1,092), reflecting strong engagement from respondents in this transitional period.

Gender Distribution

The weighted gender distribution approaches parity: males comprise 49.6% (n=1,376 raw responses), females comprise 48.7% (n=2,203), and non-binary and other gender identities comprise 1.7% (n=328). The raw sample over-represents females relative to population benchmarks, which the weighting procedure corrects. Sample sizes for non-binary and transgender respondents, while meaningful in aggregate, are insufficient for reliable subgroup analysis. We report overall patterns for these groups where possible but avoid disaggregated estimates that would lack statistical precision.

Geographic Distribution

The weighted geographic distribution reflects India's urban-rural composition: metro areas comprise 36.4% (n=1,770 raw responses), towns comprise 32.8% (n=1,222), and rural areas comprise 30.8% (n=915). Coverage spans 20 states, though some states contributed substantially more respondents than others. Rajasthan accounted for 48.6% of raw responses, reflecting the concentration of partner program activities via the Digital Champions Program in that state. The weighting procedure adjusts for this geographic imbalance to a considerable extent.

Population Weighting: Making the Sample Representative

Why Weighting Is Necessary

Online convenience samples rarely mirror the populations they aim to represent. When certain groups are over-represented among respondents while others are under-represented, simple percentages from the raw data can be misleading. For example, if our sample contained 80% urban respondents but urban youth comprise only 35% of India's youth population, raw percentages would over-weight urban experiences and under-weight rural ones.

The SCREEN sample showed significant regional over-representation: Rajasthan accounted for nearly half of raw responses despite comprising approximately 7% of India's youth population. Without adjustment, findings would largely reflect Rajasthani youth experiences rather than national patterns. Weighting aims to correct this by assigning higher importance to responses from under-represented groups and lower importance to responses from over-represented groups.

How Weighting Works

We employed a statistical technique called iterative proportional fitting, also known as raking. The intuition behind raking is straightforward: we know from Census data what the Indian youth population looks like in terms of region, age, and gender. We adjust our sample to match those known characteristics.

Imagine we have 100 survey responses, and 70 came from Rajasthan while only 5 came from Southern India. We know from Census data that Southern India contains far more than 5% of Indian youth. Raking assigns each Southern response more "weight" (perhaps each Southern response counts as several responses) while each Rajasthani response receives less weight (perhaps each counts as a fraction of a response). The procedure iterates across multiple dimensions simultaneously until the weighted sample matches population targets.

Weighting Dimensions and Population Benchmarks

We weighted on three dimensions using population benchmarks from the 2011 Census projected to 2025.

Region: India was divided into six geographic zones: North (including Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh), Central (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh), East (Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal), Northeast (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura), West (Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra), and South (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana). Each zone's youth population share served as the target.

Age: The Census reports population counts in five-year age bands (10–14, 15–19, 20–24, 25–29), while this survey used different age categories (11–13, 14–16, 17–18, 19–21, 22–25, 25–30). To align the two, we mapped survey age groups onto the corresponding Census bands for weighting. Where survey age categories did not exactly match Census bands, population proportions were estimated by assuming an equal distribution of population across each single year of age within the Census five-year bands. These estimated proportions were then used to calculate weights so that the age distribution of the survey sample more closely reflected the Census population.

Gender: Male and female population shares were set to be equal, and a fixed share of 1 percent was allocated to non-binary respondents. This approach is ad hoc, reflecting the absence of any official Census benchmark for non-binary populations in India. Rather than excluding non-binary respondents, which would remove their experiences from the analysis, we retained them through this fixed allocation. As a result, non-binary representation in the weighted estimates reflects this assumed share rather than a Census-based population proportion.

Technical Implementation

The raking algorithm ran for 500 iterations with a convergence tolerance of 0.000001. This means the procedure continued adjusting weights until marginal distributions matched targets within one hundred-thousandth of a percentage point, then stopped. Initial weights were trimmed to bounds of 0.1 to 10 to prevent any single response from receiving extreme weight that could distort estimates. A response weighted at 10 effectively counts as ten responses, while one weighted at 0.1 counts as one-tenth of a response. These bounds balance accuracy (allowing sufficient adjustment) with stability (preventing individual outliers from dominating results). The procedure converged successfully, recovering target marginal distributions within four decimal places.

Weight Diagnostics and What They Mean

Several statistics help evaluate the weighting procedure.

The **sum of weights** equals 3,907, preserving the original sample size. This is a technical choice: weighted estimates behave as if they came from a sample of this size.

The **weight range** spans 0.10 to 10.00, indicating substantial adjustment was necessary but remained within our specified bounds.

The **mean weight** equals 1.00, as expected when weights sum to sample size.

The **standard deviation of weights** (1.79) and **coefficient of variation** (1.79) indicate considerable variation in weights across respondents. Some responses count for much more than others.

The **design effect** of 4.21 is perhaps the most important diagnostic. It indicates that our weighted sample is roughly four times less statistically efficient than a simple random sample of the same size would be. Design effect arises because weighting increases variance: when some responses receive high weights, they contribute disproportionately to estimates, which increases uncertainty.

The **effective sample size** of 928 translates the design effect into intuitive terms. Our 3,907 responses, after weighting, provide approximately as much statistical precision as a simple random sample of 928 respondents would. This is still a substantial sample, sufficient for detecting moderate-to-large patterns with confidence. However, it means that small percentage differences (say, 2 to 3 percentage points) may not be statistically meaningful, and subgroup analyses with small cell sizes should be interpreted cautiously.

Interpretation Guidelines

All percentages in this report are weighted unless explicitly noted otherwise. When we report that 37.9% of respondents experienced unwanted contact from known persons, this is a weighted estimate intended to represent Indian youth aged 11 to 30, not merely our survey participants.

The effective sample size (928) should guide interpretation. For major findings involving large proportions or substantial differences (10+ percentage points), estimates are reliable. For smaller differences or subgroup comparisons with limited cell sizes, readers should consider findings as suggestive patterns meriting further investigation rather than definitive conclusions.

Validation Against External Benchmarks

Comparing survey findings against external data sources helps assess plausibility. Where our estimates diverge substantially from established benchmarks, this may indicate measurement issues, sampling peculiarities, or genuine differences in the populations being measured.

Smartphone access: Our estimate of 77.9% smartphone access aligns reasonably with ASER Centre data showing 95.7% of rural youth aged 15 to 24 can use mobile phones (ASER Centre, 2024). The gap likely reflects our broader age range (including 11 to 14 year-olds with lower access), different question framing (access versus ability to use), and the distinction between any mobile phone and specifically smartphones. The alignment provides reasonable confidence in our access measures.

Screen time: The finding that 30.1% spend 3 to 6 hours daily online is consistent with Pew Research Center findings that American adolescents average 3 to 4 hours on social media (Anderson et al., 2024), though our measure captures overall phone use rather than social media specifically. Given that Indian mobile data costs are among the world's lowest, comparable or higher usage rates are plausible.

Platform adoption: Instagram's prominence in our data (61.8%) mirrors Pew Research findings identifying image-based platforms as dominant among youth globally (Anderson et al., 2024). WhatsApp's dominance for messaging aligns with its documented market position in India.

Computer access divide: Our finding of 72.5% computer access in metros versus 36.5% in rural areas aligns with Oxfam India's documentation of persistent digital infrastructure gaps (Oxfam India, 2022).

Limitations

Every study has limitations, and transparency about them helps readers appropriately contextualise findings.

Online-only sampling means this survey, by definition, reached only those with internet access. Young people entirely offline are not represented. Findings about the digitally engaged cannot be extrapolated to those without connectivity. This limitation is common to digital survey research but particularly salient in a context where meaningful populations remain unconnected.

Self-report bias affects all measures. Respondents may underreport sensitive experiences due to social desirability concerns, shame, or fear of consequences. They may also misremember the frequency or timing of experiences. Harm exposure rates may be underestimated if respondents prefer not to disclose negative experiences. Conversely, some respondents may over-report certain experiences. We have no way to independently verify self-reported behaviours.

Cross-sectional design captures a single point in time, precluding causal inference. When we observe that heavy screen time correlates with emotional exhaustion, we cannot determine whether heavy use causes exhaustion, exhaustion drives heavy use, or both reflect some third factor. Longitudinal research tracking individuals over time would be needed to establish causal relationships.

Regional coverage remains uneven despite weighting. Some states contributed many respondents while others contributed few. Weighting corrects marginal distributions but cannot create information that does not exist. State-level estimates should be interpreted cautiously, and findings for under-represented regions are less precise than those for well-represented areas.

Language coverage included English, Hindi, and Kannada but not the many other languages spoken across India. Youth in states with other dominant languages (Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Malayalam, and others) may be under-represented, particularly those less comfortable with Hindi or English. This may bias the sample toward more educated or urban populations within those regions.

Age range breadth spans nearly two decades of developmental experience, from 11-year-olds just entering adolescence to 30-year-olds in established adulthood. Combining such diverse life stages risks masking important developmental distinctions. We address this by consistently disaggregating findings by age group, but readers should recognise that "youth" encompasses vastly different experiences at different ages.

Sampling through programme networks means respondents may have above-average exposure to digital safety concepts compared with the general youth population. Findings about safety awareness and help-seeking may not generalise to youth without such exposure. However, this limitation cuts both ways: programme participants may also be more willing to report negative experiences, potentially yielding higher harm estimates than a general population sample.

Ethical Considerations

Survey participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to commencement. Respondents could skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without consequence. Data collection was anonymous, with no personally identifying information retained. IP addresses were not logged, and responses cannot be linked to individual identities.

For respondents under 18, survey design emphasised age-appropriate language and avoided unnecessarily detailed questions about sensitive experiences. Questions about harm exposure asked about occurrence without requiring detailed descriptions. Skip logic prevented exposure to irrelevant sections based on prior responses.

The research protocol received appropriate review, and data handling followed established principles for protecting respondent confidentiality. Aggregate findings are reported; no individual responses are identifiable in this report.

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