“The Internet Is Keeping Me from Dying from Boredom”: Understanding the Management and Social Construction of the Self Through Middle-Class Indian Children’s Engagement with Digital Technologies During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract
This paper unpacks how everyday lives of urban middle-class children were mediated by digital technologies during the COVID-19 national lockdown in India. In contemporary India, children’s engagements with digital technologies are structured by their social class, gender, and geographical locations. The resultant disparities between “media-rich” and “media-poor” childhoods in India are stark (Banaji 2017). In this paper, we argue that the national lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed India’s “media-rich” children to particular threats and obstacles. Based on semi-structured interviews and mapping exercises with 16- to 17-year-old urban middle-class young people, we explore how being confined to their homes for an extended period when their schools shifted to online delivery of teaching and learning; young people negotiated risks and sought digital opportunities in the management and social construction of the self (Callero 2003, 2014). While the majority of existing studies focus on societal anxieties around children’s digital media use, in almost a medicalized and pathological fashion, and its impact on parenting practices (Lim 2020; Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020), we shift the attention to study this social phenomenon to help understand how children reflect on their engagement with technology and shape their own well-being through social construction of the self. Our findings demonstrate that children are reflexive users of digital technologies, as they navigate network failure issues, the demands of online classrooms, their own mental health and social relationships, and deploy the affordances of digital technologies to combat loneliness, nurture contact with friends, and explore educational and career resources. These strategies, in the management and social construction of the self, play out within the discourse of pedagogized middle-class childhood in India, which is imbued with notions of academic success and failure (Kumar 2016; Sen 2014). Media-rich middle-class young people’s management and social construction of the self, in the context of crisis and uncertainty, helps promote

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our understanding of the relationship between social structure, self-structure, and behavior choices, implications of this for child well-being, and reproduction of social inequality in society.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Self · Middle-class childhood · India · Education · Digital

**Background**

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Indian government imposed a national lockdown in March 2020 to help contain the spread of the virus. This lockdown led to the closure of educational institutions and the introduction of digital learning across all educational levels (Dhawan, 2020). Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government had been conceiving of ways to introduce information technology in schools to bring equality in education among all strata of the society. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) Curriculum Framework (2000) had emphasized the integration of computers and information technology as a part of the schooling process (NCF, 2000). However, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare some grave realities about the lack of existing infrastructure to support the same. The actual preparedness of establishments to switch to the online mode of education was highlighted, thereby creating a profound impact on education as there was very little readiness on the ground to provide digital education to all during the pandemic. As per survey analysis, it has been reported that only 11% of rural and 40% of urban populations were able to use the Internet and operate the computer during the lockdown in India (Ahamed & Siddiqui, 2020). A combination of the lack of opportunities to access digital education and school closures during the pandemic is said to have seriously disrupted the lives of many children in India, and with early entry into the labor market will probably never return to education again (Patra et al., 2020).

India has the world’s second largest pool of Internet users, about 600 million, comprising more than 12% of all users globally. Yet half its population lacks Internet access (Beniwal, 2020). Although 78% of India’s population own mobile phones, the tele-density in its rural areas remains as low as 57%. The Niti Aayog, in its Strategy for New India@75 report, has also considered low connectivity and weak Internet connections as major bottlenecks during the COVID-19 pandemic (ET Government, 2020). Survey findings from LIRNEasia, a digital policy research think tank, show that remote education was inaccessible to around 80% of children in India. Only 20% of students who went to schools before the COVID-19 pandemic were able to continue their studies with online classes. Children in urban households reportedly had adequate resources, which enabled them to access remote learning. Crucially, whether or not children received education during shutdowns varied with socioeconomic status and education of household head as revealed by LIRNEasia and ICRIER, 2021 (India Today, 2021).

Suicide reports such as that of a 15-year-old girl unable to access online classes and a 50-year-old farmer unable to buy a smartphone for his daughter’s online
classes illustrate the severe impact of digital inequality (Deb Barman, 2020). Such harsh inequalities push the nation and the stakeholders into realigning and reconsidering their priorities toward stepping up digital governance, information access, and service delivery mechanisms, and bolstering inclusive education (Naha, 2020).

Indeed, the socioeconomic inequalities in the adult world are bound to seep into the world of children through the walls of their homes and boundaries of their educational spaces. A dominant perspective that emerges is that children in India’s urban areas have better opportunities as well as encouragement and motivation, whereas their counterparts in village public schools depict a lack of awareness and access to Internet and technology (Mitra & Rana, 2001; Venkatesh & Sykes, 2013). However, if provided with the equality of opportunity in access and exposure to technology, children and young people from village communities and slums have been found to adapt to a new technology even without formal education, thus bridging the digital divide. Corporate and government information and communication technology initiatives like Gyandoot, ERNET, hole in the wall, cybermohalla, and e-choupal information kiosks for farmers validate the same (Asthana, 2008; Mathur, 2004; Mitra & Rana, 2001).

With e-learning being in infancy in India, numerous challenges have been presented for middle-class children too even though they possessed relatively easy access to technology during the COVID-19 lockdown. The unprecedented and sudden shift to the online mode of learning differed entirely from the traditional physical mode of the teaching–learning process. It was easy to adapt to it for students who were already sensitized as opposed to students who were new to e-learning. Online classes interfered with their overall well-being and development (Mourali, 2021). A large majority of urban middle-class parents/guardians have reported that online classes were less comfortable and less satisfactory; children displayed poor attention and concentration, and had lower learning of theoretical and practical aspects of the subject. The most reported distraction during online classes was surfing the Internet or participating in various online competitions (Grover et al., 2021). Most of the children reported a lack of interaction with teachers in online classes and low motivation for study. Students faced many obstacles and issues in submitting their assignments and attending online classes as most of the students were using mobile phones, which are not a suitable device for online classes (Khan et al., 2021).

For a typical middle-class child, the screen time increased enormously during the lockdown as the Internet was a medium for information, communication, education, and entertainment, while for some it had even become a companion for coping with loneliness and social isolation. The attention of researchers has shifted to the negative aspects of digital interactions that have been magnified for those with access to digital communications. Indeed, children were susceptible to Internet addiction even before the lockdown (Sahu et al., 2018). The pre-pandemic data suggest an excessive use of Internet by school-going adolescents, with the prevalence of Internet addiction being 3.96% in boys and 1.62% in girls and with over 15% of the total sample showing overuse of Internet but below Internet addiction criteria (Sharma et al., 2016). However, large population-based studies are not available to support the same. Assuming that increased screen time enforces a significant change to children and adolescent’s daily routine and psychological well-being, researchers have been showing enormous
interest in exploring issues such as Internet addiction and the relationship between online behavior and physical and psychological well-being among Indian children (Fernandes et al., 2020; Garg et al., 2020). Given the ongoing pandemic, a greater increase in social media use and streaming services has been revealed. Compulsive Internet use and increased social media use were strongly associated with worries of COVID-19 and symptoms of depression. Those scoring high on gaming addiction also reported increased symptoms of depression, loneliness, and escapism (Fernandes et al., 2020). However, the concerns of increased chances of developing problematic Internet use while engaging with Internet and Internet-enabled devices need to be investigated in the light of various psychosocial contextual factors. The complexity of a problematic behavior that manifests due to varied activities on digital devices requires a shift in focus and deserves to move beyond routine surveys and cross-sectional studies for a better understanding of the process.

Researchers focusing their attention on heightened screen time in children, catalyzed by the pandemic, have highlighted the need to revisit the existing recommendation on screen time for children and adolescents (Bhargava & Seshadari, 2021; Singh & Balhara, 2021). There have been proposals to incorporate various attributes of screen time besides the amount of time spent looking at the screen while making such amendments. The most important of these would be the activity being engaged in while the child is using the screen (Singh & Balhara, 2021). It has also been argued that for determining the positive or negative outcomes of engagement with the digital technology, we need to understand more relevant issues vis-a-vis the activities and content rather than just the screen time (Kardefelt-Winther & Byrne, 2020). Interestingly, Qin et al. (2020) have concluded that individuals who spend some amount of time using digital and social media are happier than those who do not use the Internet at all, while those who spend a large amount of time online tend to be the least happy. Similarly, in an English study involving a large dataset \( n=298,080 \) 15-year-olds, Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) introduced and tested what they call the “Goldilocks hypothesis,” which suggests that moderate use of the Internet may not be harmful but that overuse is likely to interfere with children and young people’s school and extracurricular activities. Their data show that moderate digital screen use may contribute positively to one’s well-being by enabling and empowering individuals to pursue their goals, feel connected with others, and enjoy life. Any detrimental impact of screen time may be small and restricted to extensive screen time that displaces activities that encourage well-being. Through our qualitative study, we aim to explore not only how the COVID-19 context led to moderate or heavy use of the Internet but also how children made use of the online space, particularly from a conceptual framework that centers on the development of the self among a middle-class group of children.

**Conceptual Framework**

In this paper, we adopt a sociological approach to expand on Callero’s framework on the self and social inequality (Callero, 2014). The above digital context, discussed in the background section, in contemporary India points to a largely medicalized
approach to understand children’s use of the Internet and to a rural/urban divide, which privileges in particular middle-class children to excel in life. It is well recognized that patterns of social inequality are evident in structures and social relationships through the uneven distribution of resources. To help explicate this further, we can employ Grusky’s threefold analysis. This entails first the processes by which resources obtain a value, then the rules for allocating resources, and finally the mechanisms linking individuals to resources (Grusky, 2007). Callero (2014:273) argues that most theories and research on this tradition explore the causes and consequences of inequality without explicitly theorizing the self. It would seem that a focus on these aspects is crucial to understand the nature of their relationship to the production and reproduction of inequality. Callero’s focus on social process and practice, and the importance of centring the self as worthy of exploration in relation to how children’s lives, are shaped by themselves and others. The core of Callero’s argument is that many categories of identity are the product of inequality processes; and that it is important to see the self as more than an outcome variable.

Arguably, humans are social beings and therefore subject to the power of social forces. At the same time, within the structural framework, humans are also agentic with the ability to navigate and make choices for their own actions. Thus, a child/childhood is both a social construction and an acting entity with an agentic capacity. Self and identity are therefore human capacities that emerge from social interaction and are embedded within broader contextual circumstances (Wiley, 1994). In effect, they are embodied notions. Thus, the availability of resources impacts the self with real “physical and psychological consequences” (Callero, 2014:275).

Through a robust analysis of children’s subjectivities, we explore how the notion of the self and how this was impacted and shaped during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help realize a broader significance, we demonstrate how the self is “instrumental in the generation, reproduction, and alteration of the social structures that sustain inequality” (Callero, 2014: 274).

**Study Aims and Methods**

Conducted during the March 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Punjab, India, this qualitative study explores middle-class Indian children’s subjective reality to help understand their context and situation and thereby draw broader inferences for Indian childhoods in the wider context of contemporary Indian society. Notably, the experience of the middle-class/media-rich child is worthy of study in itself as an important social phenomenon.

A better understanding of the experiences of more privileged children may help us appreciate digitalization among children in India more generally in relational terms. Indeed, through an analysis of the experiences of the middle-class child, we can learn about what is denied to other children. Such learning can make an invaluable contribution to our knowledge base and may help us to identify future areas of research as well as draw key implications for designing policy measures to reduce the digital divide. The empirical elements of this study followed the Children’s Understandings of Well-Being (CUWB) international research network protocol to
unpack Indian children’s everyday reality during this period of crisis (Fattore et al., 2019). A total of 24 children aged 15–17 participated in this study through the completion of a mapping exercise, one-to-one in-depth exploratory interviews, and sharing their drawings and social media posts including leisure and social protest activities. While the mapping exercise focused on important people, places, and things in the lives of children, the interviews explored children’s views and perspectives on their new temporal routine, personal and social relationships at home and online, online education, and how children were shaping their lives during this challenging period of time.

Being located in Punjab, India, the first author assumed the lead responsibility for ethics permission and for securing access to the two schools where this study was conducted. Given the constraints of the COVID-19 context of social distancing and face masks, the study adhered to the UNICEF guidelines of collecting data from children during the COVID-19 crisis (Berman, 2020). In recognition of child agency and autonomy, informed consent was obtained from all the children (including those under 16 years of age), as well as from the parents. To help address power differentials, care was taken to ensure the children were aware of their rights regarding participation in the study. Interviews were conducted within the school setting and within the requisite COVID-19 regulatory framework. We employ pseudonyms in presenting the narratives of our participants.

Notably, given the multicultural nature of Indian society, all the interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, and Punjabi by the first author (in person) and the second author (via Zoom) in real time. Both authors possess “high levels of language competence and good knowledge of the national context of concern” (Haak et al., 2013: 335). Crucially, data collection in multi-language contexts such as India has much to offer in understanding the processes of social research and the challenges of cross-cultural interviews including working through interpreters and making sense of translations.

The one-to-one interview transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis to help understand the meanings the children attached to their new social and relational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The major themes that developed from this thematic data analysis reveal children’s subjectivities about the unforeseen disruption in their everyday geographies caused by school closures, sudden online learning, and virtual home confinement. Here, we focus largely on the self and how this was shaped for and by the children in the re-scheduling of their daily life.

**Description of the Schools**

Data were collected from urban, co-educational, and English-medium schools in one large city, Punjab (India), catering to middle-class families. Most of the students who participated in the study had parents with university qualifications. Both schools have a good reputation in the city for academic performance, with their students making it to the district merit list in previous years. Both schools follow the curriculum of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the largest national school education board in India, to which they are affiliated. There were
around 1200 students in one school and the other had around 800 enrolled pupils. One of the schools in the study is based on the ideology of Sikhism and imparts religious education, inculcating a spirit of service to one’s community along with a focus on academic excellence. The other school strongly stresses on becoming responsible citizens through an emphasis on developing morality and discipline and holistic development of students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both schools were in regular contact with the students either through live online classes or via the posting of online study materials and recorded video lectures. Both schools sought to stay in touch with the parents during the March 2020 lockdown through phone calls for late submission of assignments and homework, and through monthly Zoom/Google Meeting sessions for discussing the progress of their children. To preserve the anonymity of our participating schools, we have provided only a thumbnail sketch here, and we have refrained from associating the child participant with their school.

Sample

Our study participants came from relatively comfortable middle-class homes, but there was certainly no uniformity across the group in terms of parental education and employment. From the mapping exercise, which included a demographic questionnaire, it is evident that there was a considerable diversity in these middle-class households. While the majority of the mothers were said to be housewives, the children’s fathers were reported to be employed in a range of work settings, for example as a government worker, supervisor, court clerk, or self-employed (farmers, shopkeepers, and other businesses, for example carpentry). Only half of our sample reported that their parents had a university-level education (n = 13 fathers and n = 12 mothers). Interestingly, while a few university-educated mothers were working as teachers, accounts managers, or in a government job, most were housewives. Crucially, these children were in fee-paying schools, which suggests that their parents prioritized their children’s education but not all families were perhaps financially comfortable.

Findings

COVID-19 induced school closures altered the normal trajectory of children’s personal, social, and educational lives, thereby destabilizing them in a variety of ways, with its tremors reaching into their personhood, identity, and sense of self. In the presentation of our findings, we outline how the sudden school closures drastically changed the daily lives of children and interrupted their sense of stability, continuity, direction, and purpose. Moreover, we explore how the school closures and stay-at-home orders added risk to their future aspirations and how the role of social class resources helped shape children’s sense of self.
COVID-19 Threats and Obstacles in Everyday Life

In spite of their middle-class background, the shifts in places of education from school to the digital mode proved to be deleterious to the children largely due to poor connectivity issues and the lack of in-person contact with teachers. Many of the children reported their frustrations and challenges over the lack of a stable Internet network and disruption to their everyday education. Several children such as Riya, aged 16, reported that they were unable to join online classes at times due to poor Internet connection, while others such as Arun (aged 17) provided a broader understanding of such problems in the context of resources and inequality:

The Internet now (since COVID-19 lockdown) has such a big role in studies and playing as well. So, there should be high network connectivity. Lots of people are facing a network problem as network connectivity in the area is very low. In some parts of India, the connectivity is very poor, so children are facing a big problem during the lockdown.

Arun’s narrative identifies the centrality and the crucial importance of the Internet in children’s education as a consequence of the spread of the virus and school closures. It is evident that while generalizing network problems for many, he specifically focuses on the impact of this on children such as himself. Paradoxically though, in addition to connectivity concerns, middle-class children experienced fear and anxiety about excessive exposure to digital technology. Our participants expressed worry and consternation about the actual and perceived consequences of the shift to online lives. Interestingly, although we may argue that Generation Z already lived their lives online, it became evident that, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the children in our study demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the short- and long-term implications of conducting their lives online (Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

Some adolescents reported being high on sensation/thrill-seeking and risk-taking behaviors. The sudden availability of free time and accessibility to gadgets coupled with dull and monotonous routines and lack of excitement in their real-life exposed the children to a variety of online threats. Higher screen time is associated with higher online risks in children and young people (Blaya et al., 2016). Many children reported eye strain, overindulgence in indiscriminate gaming, witnessing cyberbullying, and exposure to cyber hate and age- inappropriate content. Arguably, this has wider implications for the identity formation of adolescents, where new communication technologies have expanded access to a wide range of contexts, thus altering “the backdrop against which identity is constructed” (Cerulo, 1997: 397). Most children reported excessive use of social media, which has strong implications on their psychosocial development and identity formation within a new context, as Alt-heide (2000) notes that the influence of technological apparatuses can be seen in the establishment of “media communities” that add a new dimension to the physical and symbolic environment of our everyday lives. The narratives below from both boys and girls provide us with a sense of excessive exposure to the Internet:

Now we sit almost 8 to 10 h in front of the computer and eyes also sometimes get strained. It is an almost boring, monotonous work. We have to do
same thing every day. There is also no discipline, and the routine is also badly affected (Rajdeep, boy, 15).

It has badly affected the life of young children. They are just playing games or using other apps while attending online classes. They attend the classes to mark their presence but are not concentrating on their studies (Harsha, girl, 16).

Through discussion and their careful reflection, we learned that the children demonstrated a considerable understanding and awareness of their new reality. The distinction between the past and present activities was pronounced as the children shared their stories about how their sense of self was impacted in their everyday life and the new obstacles they now encounter. The monotony of the routine and its likely effect on their psychological and physical well-being concerned our participants. Apprehensions about lack of adequate sleep, eye strain, addiction to the Internet, parental disapproval, safety, cyberporn, online hate, and trolling were not uncommon concerns. The children were all too well aware about new and harmful habits and sought guidance from each other and adults around them to stay safe. For example, 15-year-old Aman told us that her sister had been targeted by trolls:

My sister used to upload her pictures and she was badly trolled. She is not safe on the Internet.

While the boys reported their penchant to expend much time on the Internet playing games or being subjected to cyber hate, the girls generally raised concerns around safety and the need for some intervention to break the cycle. For example, Tanvir’s worry about her cousin’s Internet addiction to the game PUBG shows her unease:

PUBG is so harmful, but kids are still playing a lot. My cousin is addicted to PUBG. He is 3 years older than me. He plays PUBG until late at night without any break. He does not exercise. He only takes a break from PUBG when he has to go to the washroom. He only attends classes when his mother is watching him, otherwise he starts playing the game.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, rising trends of online gaming in children has been a matter of concern in India. Media reports reveal that the pandemic has disrupted the lives of Indian children with gaming addiction (Balakrishnan, 2021). In a particular case related to PUBG, a 16-year-old from Mumbai left his house after his father reprimanded him for having spent ₹10 lakhs in a month from his mother’s bank account and for making in-game purchases while playing PUBG online (Sood, 2021).

COVID-19 Impact on the Future Self

How young middle-class lives were impacted by the numerous obstacles and the new reality was palpable in the study participant narratives. The most anxious about their future self were the children studying in the exit classes. These students expressed their fears about not being able to crack the competitive examinations for entry into desired professional courses and in reputed higher education institutions. For an average middle-class child in India, achievement in these examinations is a major developmental task and the entire family places high expectations on
academic success. Entry into a professional course is considered as the most prized gateway to a successful and meaningful life in middle-class households. In the face of the pandemic and in the absence of pre-pandemic level in-person coaching/tuition, children expressed feelings of being left behind in terms of their preparation for such examinations. Words such as fear, uncertainty, insecurity, de-motivation, risk, and danger were deployed by the children to express their concerns about their future. Seventeen-year-old Pritam’s concerns were shared by many of her peers:

When this lockdown was getting extended, I started getting insecure about my future. I started questioning as to why this had to happen at my time? I had thought I will score good marks in 12 classes.

The poor quality of the online education and the lack of direct contact with their teachers also concerned these children. Riya, 17 years of age, locates her disquiet in the brevity of the online lectures, lack of opportunity and access to explore topics and interact directly with the teachers:

There is a lot of effect on education. What can we grasp in a 10-min video lecture? We cannot even ask queries from our teachers. In school, we could do all that. We can just understand 20–40% of the topic.

Many children who found themselves in this situation stressed the importance of repeating the year as they believed that they had missed out on important educational input and that they only possessed a minimum understanding of some of the key concepts and ideas. Descriptions of depression and suicide were deployed to raise an alarm on some of the worst outcomes that may arise from this situation. Such accounts were located in children’s fears that they may not make it to the top higher education institutions and middle-class professions such as doctors and engineers. Jovan, 17 years of age, highlights some of the key fears and apprehensions:

Children are not studying. Even if they are getting online classes, they are not studying. They will get into this bad habit forever. If they fail, they will commit suicide.

Given the actual and perceived impact of COVID-19 on their future self, our study participants also demonstrated remarkable self-management and efficacy during a crisis. Below, we explore how the structural aspects of these children’s middle-class positionality helped shape their sense of self.

**Shaping the Future Self in a Pandemic**

The interviews reflect the children’s conscious attempts to cope with their life stressors, anxieties, and boredom due to the lockdown. Some of the key areas highlighted by the study participants included the positive and creative use of the Internet, their interactions with their parents and wider family in the joint family system, the influence of middle-class peers, and the social class resources embedded in their households. As mentioned above, the worry and consternation of the COVID-19 lockdown, the closure of schools and outdoor spaces of leisure, and the lack of in-person social contact with their peers and others altered the temporal and spatial reality of middle-class children in numerous ways. Use of technology as a coping mechanism represents a new kind of inequality that arose during the pandemic, something denied to children without such access to the Internet. As depicted in
the narratives below, our study participants reported how they made positive use of online resources to further themselves:

I do not watch TV much, so I use the Internet. Geography is my favorite subject, so I look up stuff about that. My father says now that you have studied for 8 h, do something other than studies. I love using maps and things like that. After that, I use social media (Navsher, boy, 15).

I cope with my loneliness with music, programs on TV, and some relaxing games (Indu, girl, 16).

The uneven distribution of valued resources across social groups is generally understood to be a key marker of social inequality (Callero, 2014). Moreover, the impact of such inequity on the family as a social institution and its members and their social relationships is captured in the digital divide. Although low connectivity was registered as a key concern by many of our child participants, it is also evident that the availability of this key utility played an influential role in their lives. Access to this resources is reported by the children to have been a life savior, as expressed by 16-year-old Riya, “the Internet is keeping me from dying from boredom”, Many children shared stories of positive use of the Internet to acquire new or strengthen existing skills such as cooking, dancing, singing, and learning a new language. Notably, such shaping of the self through these kinds of activities was made possible through the privileged resources of the middle-class home. Indeed, the middle-class home supported the continuity of connectivity and care with their key life goals and nurturing of hobbies along with giving them some breather from their dull routines. The purchase of new e-devices during the lockdown as well as other materials via online shopping was reported by the study participants. It was also evident that in explaining to the second author (not resident in India), the middle-class consumer child demonstrated their understanding of financial risk and cybercrime, “oh, no ma’am, we pay cash on delivery.”

Greater opportunities for communication and social interactions with the parents and the wider family were also identified by our study participants as positive developments and as crucial buffers to assist with study skills but also help prevent loneliness, boredom, and poor psychological well-being:

We coped with the pandemic by talking to our parents, discussing and talking with them. I am personally facing a problem with my studying, like having classes continuously. It gets hectic. I have trouble with eye strain and headaches, so they have given me solutions where I can break my studies into parts. Sometimes when I score low marks, my brothers and my parents will guide me on how to improve on these skills (Preetam, girl, 16).

When I am bored or have a fight with my friends, or some misunderstanding with them, then I sit with my parents, my family. We sit together. We watch movies, comedy movies, something like that on Amazon and Netflix and talk about the past or something that makes us happy and makes us joyful (Navsher, boy, 15).

The children reported that in addition to providing guidance on academic study, family members acted as key motivators in facilitating engagement in hobbies and interests as well as other activities, for example, religious prayer for dealing with stress. The social class resources enabled the development of the self through key tools, for example, the availability of film/TV series streaming channels such as
Amazon and Netflix, the purchase of tools such as a camera or e-device to support a child’s interest in photography or film-making, the ability to afford online tuition classes for academic study or to learn to play a musical instrument. While such resources were not uniformly available for all, it was evident that many children made considerable use of the Internet to develop their skills, that is, even if tangible resources did not lead to direct purchase of key items. As mentioned above, it was not uncommon to hear from our study participants that they had actively acquired a key skill. For example, 16-year-old Harmeet told us about her achievements:

I have improved my skills and hobbies like dancing, calligraphy, and painting. I have used the Internet for that. I have seen videos on how to improve these skills. That (the lockdown) was a curious time for us, but I did not waste it.

In the face of the various challenges experienced by these children, middle-class families provided adequate encouragement and confidence and environment to the children to tide over the educational crisis they were facing. Inter-generational elements of support were evident through children’s narratives of the acts of parents and grandparents. Children recalled how their grandparents provided resources of self-construction through story-telling and cultural narratives. The middle-class home utilized technology and the Internet as an effective mechanism not only for academic learning but also for skill development and as a means to social and cultural survival and development.

The “self” here is the social process in operation, as seen in their efforts toward creating a meaning out of the chaos through various creative actions. Reorienting one’s self in unstructured times by executing a particular course of action reveals the self-efficacy of children during the pandemic. Their efforts to take control and agency in dealing with the crisis in this particular social location are reflected, and their self is the primary mechanism by which they are making things happen. The children employed a variety of strategies to bring congruity and balance during these unprecedented times with the support of their families and the technology available to them. With their life suddenly thrown out of gear, the identity category of being a “student” had been destabilized; however, our child participants demonstrate how they reconstructed relatively stable self meanings.

**Discussion/Conclusion**

Our key aim in this paper has been to unpack the everyday lives of urban middle-class children, from their own perspectives, to help understand how they shaped or were themselves shaped by digital technologies during the COVID-19 national lockdown in India. These children may be described as “media rich” with all the resultant assumptions about their privileged background (Banaji, 2017). Our findings show that the national lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed India’s “media-rich” children to potential and actual threats and obstacles. It is evident from the findings that the pandemic created new experiences for the already anxious middle-class children and stirred a quest for dealing healthily with their everyday stresses. Based on rich qualitative insights, we show how being confined to their homes for an extended period when their schools shifted to online delivery of
teaching and learning young people negotiated risks and sought digital opportunities in the management and social construction of the self (Callero, 2003, 2014). Through a robust analysis and a clear focus, we argue that it is important to understand how children reflect on their engagement with technology and shape their own well-being through social construction of the self.

Through our inclusion of children’s own perspectives, we challenge the commonly held assumptions around “privilege” and “a hassle-free life”. We argue that, on the contrary, the experiences of Indian middle-class children during the lockdown have been revealed to be laden with frustration and anxiety about their future owing to their fears of not being able to live up to the prescribed standards of performance. Even their experiences with the available technology have not been very satisfying. In cases where Internet connectivity is smooth and hassle-free, a number of potential threats like problematic gaming and exposure to cyber hate and cyber bullying have emerged as a challenge to their well-being and sense of self.

Despite the downside of engagement with the Internet, many youngsters have experienced the Internet as a tool to garner resilience to handle the challenges of the pandemic. The Internet has been used as a means not only to cope with the loneliness and boredom but also as a means to work on their skills and hobbies. With life suddenly thrown out of gear and no model to emulate for dealing with the crisis, these youngsters have displayed efforts to reconstruct a meaning in their life. It seems a significant achievement, as most of these children are the first-generation users of technology without informed adults around them to mediate their relationship with technology or to advise them about the use of technology for one’s growth and development. Earlier studies suggest that children and young people can adapt to technology without formal education (Asthana et al., 2008; Mathur, 2004). The present findings supplement the same by suggesting that even novel ways can be self-devised by young people to enhance their well-being during the times of crisis.

The young people in the study are revisiting their anxieties about the future when their sense of self is threatened by the ongoing pandemic. However, protective factors in the form of family, cousins, friends, and the Internet are helping them sail ahead. The facilities and affordances available to the middle-class children to navigate their lives and career in the face of the pandemic will further widen the gap of social inequality. Children who have been deprived of access to education, supportive family structures, and other resources will lose out on critical academic activities along with other mechanisms that boost resilience and well-being. Many of the underprivileged children have been forced to exit education owing to the school closures, migration, and lack of online education, thus shattering their sense of continuity and meaning, purpose, and direction in life.

A clear finding from our study is that, during the COVID-19 national lockdown in 2020, Indian middle-class children have shown themselves to be reflexive users of digital technologies, as they navigated network failure issues, the demands of online classrooms, their own mental health and social relationships, and deployed the affordances of digital technologies to combat loneliness, nurture contact with friends, and explore educational and career resources. Through the deployment of the conceptual framework of the development of the self and social inequality, it is evident that such strategies, in the management and social construction of the self,
play out within the discourse of pedagogized middle-class childhood in India, which is imbued with notions of academic success and failure (Kumar, 2016; Sen, 2014). Our study makes an important contribution in showing that media-rich, middle-class young people’s management and social construction of the self are an important area of focus. It is hoped that these findings will encourage the need for future qualitative research that can help amplify the perspectives of children. Indeed, to help understand the reproduction of social inequality and the relationship between social structure and self-structure in society, it is crucial that the research includes a diversity of children’s voices to help target appropriate policies and resources in supporting child well-being. Also, future studies could explore whether the phenomenon of using technology for coping, and the social construction of the self during the pandemic, were a response specific to the COVID-19 lockdown, or have they been carried forward in children’s regular lives in post-pandemic times.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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