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Exploring Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media: A Village-Level Case Study from Varanasi, India

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Abstract: In rural India, the growing presence of social media has introduced new challenges for children's privacy, emotional health, and identity development. This study investigates the impact of digital media on young people in a village in Varanasi, shedding light on how online interactions are reshaping their understanding of privacy, relationships, and self-identity. With social media platforms becoming increasingly accessible, rural children are now exposed to global digital environments, often without the resources or awareness to protect their personal information. The paper examines how these digital influences contribute to emotional vulnerabilities and alter cultural ties in rural settings. By exploring the intersection of social media, privacy, and childhood in this context, the research calls for more robust digital literacy initiatives and privacy safeguards, emphasising the need to protect the well-being of children navigating the complexities of an online world.

Keywords: Children's privacy, social media impact, rural India, digital literacy, emotional well-being

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Introduction

In recent years, the world has seen a rapid growth in digital technology, and India is also moving ahead in this direction. Today, due to affordable smartphones and cheap internet data, even the remotest villages of

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India are becoming digitally connected. People in rural areas, especially the youth and children, are actively using online platforms for learning, entertainment, and social interaction (Bhatt, 2020). Social media refers to those online platforms where people can share their ideas, pictures, videos, opinions, and personal experiences with others in real time. These platforms allow people to create virtual communities, stay connected with friends and relatives, and express themselves freely. Social media is not just a tool, but a complete communication system that fulfils people's need to stay in touch and be heard (Okonkwo & Awad, 2023). Its development started as early as the 1970s with the creation of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), and later grew with websites like "GeoCities" in 1995. Since then, it has evolved into many powerful platforms that we use today. Popular social media platforms such as Google (1998), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), WhatsApp (2009), Instagram (2010), and Snapchat (2011) are now common names, even in rural households[1]. Rural children, in particular, have become enthusiastic users of these platforms. They use them for watching videos, chatting with friends, playing games, and even making their own content[2]. However, while these platforms offer many benefits, they also bring certain risks- especially related to children's privacy and safety, which is the main concern of this study.

Globally, incidents like the Cambridge Analytica scandal have exposed the alarming weaknesses in how user data, especially that of minors, is handled by social media corporations. In India, however, conversations about digital privacy and child protection are still in their nascent stage, especially in rural regions where digital literacy is low, parental supervision is limited, and state regulations are either poorly implemented or not widely understood (Liu et al., 2024). Children in these areas often engage with social media without fully grasping the implications of data sharing, algorithmic tracking, or personalised advertising. Children, by definition, are considered vulnerable users because they lack the cognitive and emotional maturity to understand commercial manipulation, targeted advertisements, or the long-term consequences of data footprints. In India's rural villages- where educational resources, cyber safety awareness, and legal protections are minimal-this vulnerability becomes even more pronounced. Often, children are introduced to social media through shared family phones or peer

influence, with little to no oversight from adults who themselves may not be fully aware of digital privacy risks (Liu et al., 2024, 5). Moreover, most Indian legal frameworks do not adequately address children's privacy on digital platforms. While laws like the Information Technology Act (2000) and the more recent Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) provide some measures for data regulation, their enforcement in rural contexts remains weak. The age of digital consent, though discussed, lacks clarity and community-level implementation, thereby leaving children exposed to potentially harmful content, data exploitation, and manipulation by algorithms designed for profit, not protection (Information Technology Act, 2000). This study focuses on a village in Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh, and seeks to understand how rural children interact with social media, what kind of content they engage with, and how their personal data is being collected, used, or misused. The research also aims to examine the level of awareness among parents, teachers, and local institutions about these privacy risks, and the socio-cultural factors that shape children's digital behaviour in rural settings (Smith & Shade, 2018). Ultimately, this case study attempts to bring to light an often-overlooked dimension of digital India- the silent yet significant privacy challenges faced by children in rural environments (Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023). It underscores the urgent need for inclusive digital education, policy reform, and ethical media practices that prioritise the rights and well-being of children as digital citizens of the future.

Defining Social Media

Social media, though defined in various ways, can be broadly understood through a set of key features that make it distinct in the digital world. *First*, social media platforms are centred around *user profiles*. Each user creates a personal profile containing information such as their name, photograph, interests, and other personal details. These profiles act as digital identities and help users introduce themselves to others in the virtual space. *Second*, a core function of social media is *content sharing*. Users can share different types of content- including text, photos, videos, and web links- with their network (Azzaakiyyah, 2023, 3). This content can range from personal thoughts and life experiences to professional updates, opinions, and useful information. *Third*, *social interaction* is what makes social media dynamic.

Users can engage with content shared by others through likes, comments, shares, or platform-specific reactions. This interaction promotes dialogue and encourages the exchange of ideas across diverse communities. *Fourth*, social media enables *network building*. Users can connect with others by following them, sending friend requests, or accepting invitations, thereby forming personal and professional social networks. These networks are the foundation upon which digital communities are built and sustained. *Fifth*, social media supports the creation of *groups and communities* based on shared interests, goals, or concerns. These online spaces allow people to come together, communicate, and exchange knowledge or ideas on specific topics. Whether it's a parenting group, a student study circle, or a village-based WhatsApp group, these communities help people stay connected and informed. *Sixth*, social media thrives on *user-generated content*. Unlike traditional media, where content is created by professionals, social media relies on its users to produce content (Azzaakiyyah, 2023, 6). Here, individuals are both the creators and consumers of information- whether it's a personal video, a selfie, a blog post, or a review. This participatory nature makes social media more democratic and interactive[3]. Various standard dictionaries offer definitions that further enrich our understanding. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, social media refers to "websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone." The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos, photos and texts)." Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary describes it as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" (Zafarani., Ali & Liu, 2014). In essence, social media is more than just a technological tool- it is a space where identities are shaped, voices are amplified, and human connections are continuously redefined in a digital context.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to explore children's social media use

and their awareness of privacy in Dafi village, located in Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh, India. The research followed a combination of descriptive and exploratory research designs to capture patterns of digital behaviour and gain deeper insights into the digital vulnerabilities of children in rural areas. The descriptive research design helped in mapping the social media usage patterns among children, identifying the platforms they accessed, the type of content shared, and the frequency of their social media engagement (Arewa, 2023). The exploratory design was employed to uncover the underlying vulnerabilities children face in digital spaces, specifically focusing on digital privacy concerns and the potential risks they encounter online in a rural context. A total of 30 participants were selected for the study, including 18 children aged 10 to 17 (9 male and 9 female) and 12 adults (including parents, teachers, mobile shopkeepers, and local influencers). The participants were chosen through convenience sampling, taking into account factors like age, gender, family structure, and digital exposure. Children were the central focus of the research, with adults chosen based on their roles within the community and their interaction with children's digital lives. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with both children and adults to gather qualitative insights into their social media habits, privacy concerns, and attitudes towards digital safety. Structured surveys were distributed to children to gather quantitative data on their social media usage, platforms accessed, and privacy-related concerns. Observational methods were used to monitor children's interactions with digital devices in natural settings, providing a more comprehensive view of their online behaviour. To ensure ethical integrity, informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of children under 16, and children's assent was also acquired. Data confidentiality and participant anonymity were maintained throughout the study, with pseudonyms used to protect identities. The research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the safety and privacy of the minor participants, emphasising sensitivity to their vulnerability in the context of digital media use (Bhandari et al., 2022).

Fieldwork Schedule

This study on children's social media use and privacy awareness in Dafi village, Varanasi, followed a structured fieldwork schedule spanning 12

weeks. The methodology consisted of the following phases:

Preparation (Weeks 1-2) In the initial two weeks, the research design, objectives, and methodology were finalised. Necessary permissions were obtained from local authorities and community leaders. Research assistants were trained, and the required research tools, including interview guides, surveys, and consent forms, were prepared.

Data Collection (Weeks 3-6) In weeks 3 to 6, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 adults (parents, teachers, mobile shopkeepers), surveys with 18 children (ages 10-17), and observational methods to assess children's interactions with digital devices. Follow-up interviews with children further explored their social media habits and privacy concerns.

Data Analysis (Weeks 7-9) In the following three weeks, data were transcribed and organised for analysis. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed alongside the quantitative survey data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of children's social media usage and privacy vulnerabilities.

Report Writing and Recommendations (Weeks 10-11) The last two weeks focused on drafting and finalising the report. This included interpreting the findings and providing actionable recommendations for improving children's digital literacy and safety in rural areas.

Dissemination and Community Feedback (Week 12) In the final week, the study's findings were shared with the local community, including village leaders, parents, and teachers. A workshop was organised to raise awareness about digital safety and to discuss measures for protecting children's privacy online.

This structured approach ensured a thorough exploration of the research questions while engaging the community in the process of improving digital safety for children.

Field-based Case Study

This case study investigates how children in the rural village of Dafi, located in Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh, engage with social media and how this interaction shapes their understanding of digital privacy. With the rise in smartphone usage and internet connectivity in remote areas, children aged 10 to 17 are increasingly active on platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook (ASER Centre, 2023). However, many of these children engage with social media without adequate digital literacy,

adult supervision, or awareness of the risks associated with their online behaviour.

The central aim of this study was to assess how children use social media, what personal information they share, and how their socio-economic and educational backgrounds influence their online experiences. Convenience sampling was used to select 30 participants, including 18 children aged 10 to 17 (9 male, 9 female) and 12 adults (parents, teachers, mobile shopkeepers, local influencers). This sampling method helped to gather responses from participants willing to share their experiences, reflecting the ground realities of the rural setting (ASER Centre, 2023). This research addresses three key questions:

RQ1: *What privacy-related challenges do rural children face while using social media in the selected village of Varanasi?*

RQ2: *What do children and their parents understand about data protection, personal information sharing, and social media surveillance?*

RQ3: *How do factors such as education level, family income, and digital exposure influence children's vulnerability in online spaces?*

To systematically explore these questions, the case study is divided into five sections:

Section-1: Ethical Concerns in Rural Contexts – This section examines issues like unsupervised internet use, digital peer pressure, and early exposure to inappropriate content. Section-2: Patterns of Usage and Data Sharing – Based on field data, it delves into children's mobile habits, the content they consume or share, and how their personal data circulates on these platforms. Section-3: Legal Framework and Applicability – This section reviews Indian laws such as the Information Technology Act (2000) and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023), assessing their relevance for rural populations. Section-4: Village-Level Evidence – Presents case narratives, quotes, and observations that highlight gaps in awareness and social vulnerabilities among children in this context. Section-5: Recommendations – Provides actionable steps, such as digital literacy programs, school-based interventions, and Gram Panchayat-led awareness drives, to enhance child online safety in rural India.

Grounded in primary field research and local perspectives, this case study offers a unique lens into how children in rural Varanasi are navigating

social media without the necessary tools to protect their privacy. It underscores the urgent need for context-specific digital education, stronger community engagement, and inclusive policy reforms to safeguard India's youngest digital citizens (ASER Centre, 2023).

Table 1: Profile of Participants in Dafi Village of Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh

S. N.	*Name (Pseudonym)*	*Age (Years)*	*Gender*	*Role in Community*	*Relevant Notes*
1	Raju	13	Male	School Student	Active on Instagram; shares cricket match videos
2	Meena	14	Female	School Student	Watches YouTube shorts; admires local influencers
3	Kusum	17	Female	High School Student	Shares reels on social media; follows trends
4	Chanda	16	Female	Student	Post the school events on social media
5	Sameer	22	Male	Local Influencer	Creates comedy videos; unaware of data tracking
6	Farhan	20	Male	Cyber Café Operator	Helps villagers access online forms, unaware of data risks
7	Sita Devi	39	Female	Mother/Farmer	Limited understanding of digital platforms
8	Ramprasad	45	Male	Father/Weaver	Uses a feature phone; unaware of children's online activities
9	Anjali	29	Female	School Teacher	Educates students about responsible media use
10	Vinod	35	Male	Mobile Shopkeeper	Installs apps and handles phone setups for villagers
11	Reena	32	Female	ASHA Worker	Uses WhatsApp; promotes digital health awareness
12	Manoj	41	Male	Panchayat Member	Supports digital awareness initiatives
13	Harish	27	Male	Tuition Teacher	Warns students about sharing too much online
14	Lakshmi	50	Female	Grandmother/ Caregiver	No digital knowledge; worried about child's phone use
15	Nisha	12	Female	School Student	Active on Snapchat; interested in fashion trends
16	Rohit	15	Male	School Student	Plays games online; shares updates about his hobbies
17	Priya	11	Female	School Student	Follows educational channels on YouTube
18	Krishna	14	Male	School Student	Frequently chats on WhatsApp; participates in group discussions
19	Aarti	13	Female	School Student	Watches videos about social causes on YouTube

S. N.	*Name (Pseudonym)*	*Age (Years)*	*Gender*	*Role in Community*	*Relevant Notes*
20	Mohan	16	Male	High School Student	Interested in learning programming; active on Discord
21	Ankit	12	Male	School Student	Follow tech influencers on Instagram
22	Simran	14	Female	School Student	Shares creative writing posts on social media
23	Gauri	10	Female	School Student	Enjoys watching educational cartoons on YouTube
24	Amit	15	Male	School Student	Interested in photography; shares pictures on social media
25	Neha	13	Female	School Student	Follow beauty influencers on Instagram
26	Kunal	14	Male	School Student	Plays mobile games; shares his achievements on social media
27	Ayesha	16	Female	Student	Interested in music and posts her singing videos online
28	Deepak	13	Male	School Student	Active in online communities related to sports
29	Sheetal	15	Female	High School Student	Shares makeup tutorials on social media
30	Vikram	12	Male	School Student	Often shares memes and jokes on Facebook

Field-Based Analysis of Social Media Use and Privacy Awareness in Dafi Village

Section 1: Ethical Concerns in Rural Contexts

Digital engagement among children in Dafi village introduces several ethical concerns. Due to limited digital literacy, many children access the internet without adult supervision. To understand this, children were asked about their daily social media usage, the kind of content they consume, and whether parents are aware of their activities. Raju (13) openly shared his passion for uploading cricket match videos on Instagram, mentioning that his parents are mostly unaware of what he posts. Kusum (17) talked about her habit of sharing reels on social media, admitting she never thought about who might be watching. During interactions, parents like Ramprasad (a father and weaver) revealed that they only occasionally check their children's phones, largely due to their own lack of understanding of digital platforms. Sita Devi, a mother and farmer, expressed concern over

her daughter's increasing screen time but confessed she did not know how to monitor her social media usage (Esquina et al., 2024). The study also explored the notion of digital peer pressure. Meena (14) discussed how she follows local influencers on YouTube and tries to imitate their styles, feeling the need to stay connected and updated with her friends. Observational data showed children frequently exchanging phones to view each other's posts, reinforcing peer influence. Teachers like Anjali (29) noted that this pressure sometimes leads students to share more than they should, often without considering privacy risks (Donthu et al., 2022)

Section 2: Patterns of Usage and Data Sharing

Field observations indicate a strong inclination towards mobile-based social media usage among children. Interviews revealed that Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook are predominantly used for communication, entertainment, and social validation. When asked about privacy, most children, including Chanda (16), who posts school event pictures online, admitted they rarely adjust privacy settings. Raju (13) and Sameer (22), a local influencer, spoke about how they publicly share videos without considering data protection. Sameer, who creates comedy content, mentioned he had "nothing to hide," showing a lack of awareness about digital footprints. Mobile shopkeeper Vinod (35) was interviewed to understand the technical side of digital exposure. He shared that many children come to his shop to install apps and set up social media accounts, often without parental consent. He admitted that while he helps with installations, he never discusses privacy settings, largely because no one asks about it (Griffin, 2023).

Section 3: Legal Framework and Applicability

Despite the growing digital engagement, awareness of legal protections under the Information Technology Act (2000) and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) remains low in Dafi. Questions related to legal rights and online safety were met with confusion among parents like Ramprasad and Sita Devi. Most were unaware that laws existed to protect their children's data. Even mobile shopkeeper Vinod and local influencer Sameer were unfamiliar with legal terms like "data protection"

or "cyber safety." Panchayat member Manoj (41) acknowledged this gap, emphasising the need for workshops to educate the community (Holzscheiter et al., 2019).

Section 4: Village-Level Evidence

Conversations with community members provided anecdotal evidence of privacy risks and social vulnerabilities. For example, Kusum's regular sharing of Instagram reels without privacy settings makes her data publicly accessible. When asked if she knew who could view her posts, she responded, "Sabhi dekh sakte hain, par isme dikkat kya hai?" (Everyone can see it, but what's the problem with that?). This lack of understanding was echoed by Chanda (16), who often shares pictures from school events on Facebook without realising her posts are visible to strangers. She mentioned that "mujhe sabko dikhana achha lagta hai" (I like showing it to everyone), reflecting a social validation mindset that is not tempered by privacy awareness.

Observations at the cybercafé operated by Farhan (20) showed that many children come alone to access online forms and applications, with minimal knowledge of digital risks. Farhan admitted he simply helps them fill out forms and "koi puchhta nahi hai privacy ke baare mein" (no one asks about privacy). One incident involved a group of boys filling out a scholarship form online, openly sharing their Aadhaar numbers and family details without hesitation. When asked if they knew where the information goes, one replied, "Form bharne se kaam ho jaata hai, bas" (Filling the form gets the work done, that's it). During field interviews, Reena (32), an ASHA worker, highlighted how mobile phone usage among children is growing rapidly, but with no proper guidance. She narrated an instance where a girl from the village mistakenly shared her family's financial details on WhatsApp, thinking it was part of an online survey. "Koi bhi link khol deti hain, bina soche samjhe" (They open any link without thinking), she remarked, emphasising the need for digital literacy. These observations reflect a significant gap in understanding privacy and data security. Children are not only unaware of the potential misuse of their shared information but also do not recognise the importance of safeguarding their personal details online.

Section 5: Recommendations

To address these challenges, it is crucial to implement digital literacy programs tailored to rural settings. Interviews with teachers like Anjali revealed a strong need for school-based interventions focused on privacy settings, safe online behaviour, and the implications of data sharing. Furthermore, discussions with Manoj (Panchayat member) highlighted the potential for Gram Panchayat-led awareness drives to extend learning to parents and local influencers.

Workshops conducted in collaboration with local stakeholders like Vinod (mobile shopkeeper) and Manoj could focus on safe device configurations and legal awareness. Establishing a 'Digital Safety Committee' within the village could also ensure continuous monitoring and support for children's online safety. This field-based analysis underlines the critical need for digital education and legal awareness in Dafi, empowering children and their families to navigate social media safely and responsibly.

Findings

The study conducted in Dafi village of Varanasi district reveals significant insights into children's use of social media, parental awareness, and emerging digital risks. Interviews and observations with 30 participants, including 18 children and 12 adults, highlight a growing engagement with platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook among rural children aged 10 to 17. Despite active participation, most children lack awareness of online privacy settings and data protection. For instance, many openly share personal photos, school events, and even location details without understanding who can access this information. The idea of digital footprints and long-term consequences remains largely unfamiliar to them. Parental awareness regarding children's online activities is minimal. Most parents interviewed admitted to limited knowledge of how social media platforms function. Mothers like Sita Devi, who is involved in farming, shared that she is unaware of what her daughter shares online. Fathers like Ramprasad, a weaver, mentioned that he uses a basic feature phone and does not understand smartphone applications, leaving children unsupervised during their online interactions. This lack of mediation creates a digital gap where children navigate online spaces without guidance or understanding

of risks (Nayaka et al., 2024). This study also uncovered emerging threats such as cyberbullying and online scams. Conversations with Farhan, a cybercafé operator, revealed that children frequently visit his shop to access online forms and social media, often disclosing personal details without hesitation. Farhan noted that many children click on unverified links and share personal information on public platforms, exposing themselves to scams and data breaches. Despite these risks, there is limited community dialogue around digital safety. Teachers and community leaders expressed the need for awareness programs to educate children and parents about online privacy and responsible digital use (Panda et al., 2020). These findings highlight the urgent need for structured digital literacy initiatives to protect rural children from online vulnerabilities and promote safe internet practices.

Discussion

The findings from the field study in Dafi village of Varanasi district illuminate critical aspects of children's social media use, parental awareness, and emerging digital vulnerabilities in rural settings. The study revealed that children actively engage with platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook without sufficient knowledge of privacy settings or the implications of sharing personal information online. This behaviour underscores a significant gap in digital literacy, which is further compounded by the limited technological understanding of parents and community members (Price et al., 2021). One of the primary observations is the normalisation of open sharing among children. Many participants, particularly those aged 14 to 17, regularly upload photos, videos, and status updates without adjusting privacy controls. For instance, Kusum's open Instagram reels and Chanda's Facebook posts of school events demonstrate a lack of awareness about who can access their content. This unrestricted sharing increases their exposure to online risks, including cyberbullying and data misuse. The absence of basic digital safety education means that children are often unaware of the permanence of online content and the potential for misuse by unknown viewers**.** Parental oversight in Dafi village is minimal, primarily due to a lack of understanding of digital platforms. Parents like Ramprasad and Sita Devi expressed their inability to monitor

their children's online activities effectively, citing their own unfamiliarity with smartphones and the internet. This lack of parental mediation allows children to explore digital spaces independently, often without recognising the dangers associated with online interactions. Interviews with Anjali, a local schoolteacher, further highlighted that parents are largely dependent on their children for technological tasks, reversing the expected roles of guidance and protection. This gap not only makes children vulnerable but also prevents timely intervention in cases of cyberbullying or privacy breaches (Scheinbaum, 2024). The study also uncovered risks related to online scams and misuse of personal information. Farhan, the cybercafé operator, mentioned that children frequently fill out online forms without understanding data protection. Sensitive information such as Aadhaar numbers, family details, and even financial data is often shared without caution. This reflects a broader issue of digital naivety where convenience is prioritised over security, making children easy targets for online fraud and phishing. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. First, digital literacy programs targeted at both children and parents are crucial for fostering safe online practices. Schools can play a pivotal role by integrating digital safety into their curriculum, ensuring that children understand concepts like privacy settings, secure passwords, and recognising online threats. Additionally, community-led workshops can raise awareness among parents, enabling them to guide their children effectively. Strengthening local institutions, such as Gram Panchayats, to promote cyber awareness can also bridge the information gap. These steps are vital for protecting children in rural areas as they navigate the complexities of the digital world. Promoting digital literacy and community awareness can significantly reduce risks, empowering children to use social media responsibly and securely.

Conclusion

The exploration of children's social media use in Dafi village of Varanasi district highlights a growing digital engagement among rural youth, marked by both opportunities and vulnerabilities. This unchecked digital exposure increases their susceptibility to risks such as cyberbullying, data theft, and online exploitation. Parental involvement in monitoring children's

online activities remains minimal, primarily due to limited digital literacy among adults. Most parents are unfamiliar with social media platforms and are unaware of the potential risks associated with unrestricted internet access. This digital disconnect prevents effective parental guidance, leaving children to navigate the complexities of the online world largely on their own. Teachers and community members also acknowledged the growing influence of social media but cited a lack of structured awareness programs to educate children about safe online practices. The findings indicate an urgent need for targeted digital literacy initiatives in rural areas. Schools can play a critical role in introducing concepts of online safety, data privacy, and responsible sharing. Community-based workshops led by local influencers and educators can further strengthen awareness, ensuring that both children and parents understand the importance of digital security. Strengthening community support through local governance, like Gram Panchayat awareness campaigns, can also contribute to building a safer digital environment for children.

Notes

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