Good Girls Don't Go Online: Unpacking the Quotidian Playful Resilience Influencing Girls' Social and Digital Engagements

KIRAN VINOD BHATIA
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

PAYAL ARORA
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands[1]

MANISHA PATHAK-SHELAT[1]
MICA Ahmedabad, India

In this study, we examine the ways in which young girls from low-income communities exercise their autonomy and agency in their engagement with digital technologies and, at times, show compliance with social norms when online. Based on our findings from our ethnographic fieldwork, we argue that young girls' engagement with digital technologies reflects both submission to the dominant gender, class realities, and a sustained desire to create a fraying around the edges of systems for gendered surveillance-discipline. We develop the concept of "quotidian playful resilience" (QPR) to unpack the influence of gender norms and class-based experiences on young girls' everyday digital practices. We define QPR as a meta practice that informs how girls access, use, and navigate digital technologies—including the infrastructural affordances and limitations and the realm of the digitalscape. The study explores the productive associations between gender, class, and technology in young girls' digital encounters in India.

Keywords: social surveillance, online participation, India, creative insurgencies, quotidian playful resilience

This study is a part of a four-year-long ethnographic project undertaken to understand how young girls in India engage with digital technologies from within the felt contours of their lived sociocultural realities. We examine how girls exercise their autonomy, agency, and, at times, compliance with social norms in their engagement with digital media. Though many studies explore the scope of young girls' engagement with digital technologies, few delve into the everyday digital practices among girls in the Global South, and particularly

---

Kiran Vinod Bhatia: kvbhatia2@wisc.edu
Payal Arora: arora@esphil.eur.nl
Manisha Pathak-Shelat: manisha.shelat@micamail.in
Date submitted: 2021-03-11

with a focus on the intersection of class, gender, and cultural norms. Moreover, most of these studies center the utilitarian-driven notions influenced by the development paradigm and neoliberal motivations for digital engagements that include efforts to acquire education, better jobs, and/or class mobility (Arora, 2019a). Studies deploying these approaches in communication studies thereby miss out on the granularities of everyday motivations, aspirations, concerns, and practices enacted by such understudied populations.

To push against these limitations, we identify the multitude of sociocultural and class norms that girls from low-income families inhabit and provide ethnographic narratives unpacking their digital engagements. We acknowledge that the lived realities of girls from low-income neighborhoods can overlap with those from other economic classes because cultural norms can overtake class as a mitigating factor. However, class as a category does confine and restrict the legitimate choices girls in resource-constrained settings have in circumventing patriarchal structures. We build on Baviskar and Ray's (2011) approach to comparative class contexts to argue that the low-income communities exhibit internal complexity even when the formation of the class category continues to be informed by the hegemonic values and practices relevant in their communities under conditions of urbanization.

Based on our findings from our ethnographic fieldwork, we propose the concept of "quotidian playful resilience" (QPR)—a framework useful in identifying and theorizing the various techniques and strategies girls use in their engagements with digital technologies to circumvent, negotiate with, and/or inhabit the sociocultural norms dominant in their societies. Our approach provides insights for scholars working in privacy and surveillance studies and human-computer interactions to push against the normalization of gendered practices online by pivoting their attention to understudied contexts, intersectional identities, and populations. In doing so, we make the case (a) for inclusive scholarship by focusing on a growing and pluralistic user base recently coming online because of cheap mobile phones and data plans; (b) to rethink and decenter dominant tropes within privacy studies and youth studies, and to recenter "class" in current discussions on intersectionality, and, (c) to serve as an ally for postcolonial feminists in their efforts to disrupt staid binaries, expand intersectionality across borders, and push back universalisms by pushing forth voices and everyday praxis from the global margins.

Review of Literature

Literature on children's engagement with digital technologies is largely confined to questions of either victimhood-oppression or resistance-subversion. Using simplistic binaries such as actor-victim, agent-recipient, and threats-safety is a reductionist strategy for examining children's digital engagements. This reductionism is evident in studies situated within wealthy countries and often encourages scholars to adopt a universalizing discourse on children's digital engagement (Betts & Spencer, 2016; Suoranta & Lehtimäki, 2004). Dominant discussions emerge from within the "risk-opportunity" paradigm (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; Finkelhor, Walsh, Jones, Mitchell, & Collier, 2020; Livingstone & Smith, 2015) that position children either as digital natives and active subjects (of change) or passive witnesses (of violence and discrimination). Pushing against these theoretical boundaries requires that scholars pay attention to the influence of the sociocultural norms and the class-based contexts children inhabit in their digital engagements.

There is substantial research on girls' digital engagements in the West—online consumption, gaming, digital privacy, social media use, digital romance, and Internet regulation (Fisher & Jensen, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). The limited studies that explore the realities beyond this geographic arena often embrace technological optimism and/or the empowerment discourse, emphasizing ways in which digital technologies can revolutionize living conditions, teaching-learning environments, employment opportunities, health-care facilities, and safety for girls in resource-constrained environments in countries in the Global South (Chatterjee, Majumdar, Misra, & Damaševičius, 2020; Tacchi, Kitner, & Crawford, 2012). Also, theories generated in the West are often transposed to contexts in the Global South without regard to distinct sociocultural realities, historical, and class struggles. Scholars such as Cortesi and Grasser (2015), Diwakar (2016), and Pathak-Shelat and Deshano (2014) have emphasized the need to study the dynamics of digital engagements as largely informed by distinct national histories, local cultures, and their lived realities.

There has been a growing interest in challenging these normative constructs, particularly through ethnographic works. Arora and Rangaswamy (2013) push against the utilitarian driven notions and recenter digital leisure as a key driver of tech adoption and adaptation. Arora (2019a) questions the role of development agencies that appreciate the digital engagements of children in India merely as a fertile site for developing new programs and projects to tackle poverty and illiteracy. The rationale guiding these development-based programs is embedded in a deep-seated assumption that the poor children are largely driven by utilitarian needs and wants and use digital technologies to seek socioeconomic empowerment. Arora (2019a) questions this "pervasive belief that the global poor are more likely than the wealthy to use the Internet for practical purposes" and proposes digital leisure as an important interpretive lens to disrupt the delimited understandings of how class as a dialectic influences children's digital engagement (p. 3). Nemer and Freeman's (2015) ethnographic study to examine the role of selfies in the slums of Brazil highlight how "practices of understanding, interpreting, and experiencing selfies are embedded in dense sociocultural contexts" (p. 1844). They draw our attention to the social uses of technology and identify ways in which the lived realities of people inform engagements with digital technologies. The finding of two other ethnographic studies conducted in rural areas of India (Bhatia & Pathak-Shelat, 2018, 2019) reveal that children continue to operate from within the boundaries of social structures in their societies as they engage with the available forms and formats of media in their communication ecology.

Since young girls' engagement with digital technologies is still largely understood in a technologically driven, liberal frame of political action, scant attention is paid to the productive associations between the social norms they inhabit (here, class and gender) and the everyday playful actions of resilience and visceral aspects of fun. The dialectic of class and gender can operate as constraining social positions—influencing the sociocultural norms girls inhabit. The interpretive boundaries of the class and gender dialectic manifest in the strategies girls design to access, use, and participate in digital technologies. To address these limitations, there are two research questions guiding our inquiry:

RQ1:   *How do gender norms and class-based experiences influence young girls' engagements with digital technologies?*

RQ2:   *Which tactical strategies of digital engagement do girls design and deploy to resist/circumvent the*
        gender-class norms they inhabit?

Methodology

Site

This study is a part of the larger ethnographic project undertaken to understand children's digital engagements in three cities of India: Bangalore, Delhi, and Mumbai. Bhatia worked as a media educator in these cities and neighborhoods for two years before initiating an ethnographic study to examine their digital engagements. During her role as a media educator, she developed a rapport of trust and understanding with children in the neighborhoods, and this encouraged her to base her study on their lived experiences and realities.

All the children in this project come from low-income families. Twenty-five girls had volunteered to participate in the project, and 14 continued to be involved actively till the end. In this study, we focus attention on the lives of 14 girls (13–16 years old) who were active participants throughout the project. These girls were students in the media education classes that the authors conducted and were comfortable with both interacting with the researcher and participating in this study.

The lived experiences for most of the girls are limited to low-income formal and informal neighborhoods that are commonly referred to as "slums." In all these settlements, drinking water is scarce and available for only 30 to 60 minutes each day. Many participants have families consisting of seven to eight members staying in small 500-square-feet apartments. Also, the durability of the households is a problem; most of these houses have leaking roofs—especially during monsoons—faulty plumbing, and insect infestations. However, none of the girls in the study ever referred to their neighborhoods as slums or *jhuggis*. This is consistent with poverty studies literature, which reveals that people in resource-constrained situations see themselves as upwardly mobile and, at times, even middle class (Arora, 2019a).

All the participants stay in crowded neighborhoods, congested houses, and often demonstrate collective online practices. For instance, family members in low-income households in India regularly share digital technologies such as mobile phones, televisions, computers, Internet connections, and even social media accounts, especially WhatsApp messenger (Rangaswamy & Cutrell, 2013). The lived experiences, spatial configurations, and sociocultural norms inform girls' perspectives on notions of access, autonomy, privacy, and surveillance.

Methods

To appreciate the multiple ways in which girls negotiate their everyday lives, we adopted a phenomenological approach to capture their intentionality that can pendulate between their conformity to class-gender–based surveillance and their aspiration to change these norms to gain greater access and autonomy. To traverse through these complexities, we deployed a set of data-gathering practices. The ethnographic immersion in the lived experiences and digital routines of the 14 girl participants began in

April 2018 and continued until February 2019—conducting participant observations (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) by hanging out with them on their social media accounts, at their homes, in their schools, and in their neighborhoods, coaching classes, and marketplaces.

We gathered extensive field notes studying the ways in which girls accessed and used digital technologies; conducted in-depth interviews with them to understand their perspectives, strategies, and techniques about their digital engagements; and followed them on their social media accounts (if they were active and willing to allow us to follow them online). Four participants wanted to keep their social media accounts anonymous because they were hiding their online presence from their parents and other family members with Facebook accounts. For all the other girl participants, we conducted social media ethnography (Postill & Pink, 2012) to examine their online activities, including who they were following and why, what they do on their social media accounts, and what information they shared with others. We regularly conducted unstructured interviews with our participants to gather data on their social media engagement that would not be evident through participant observation. During these interviews on social media engagements, most of our participants shared information on what they do in their personal social media spaces such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger, their browsing activities, the time they spend on their social media "stalking" others and/or watching content, and what they thought about their engagement and/or the content they consumed. We also conducted semi-structured interviews (in English and Hindi) to understand how their class and gender experiences and expectations influenced their digital engagements.

Throughout this project, we closely followed feminist understandings of research ethics (Skeggs, 1995) in developing processes that allow us to account for the problematics of personal experiences, power, and social differences. Our methods of immersion and interactions are anchored in feminist research methodologies to ensure that the interests of the vulnerable research participants are protected and encouraged (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Shaw, 2013; Taft, 2011). Though only two participants wanted to use pseudonyms for safety, we have decided not to reveal the real names of any participants to protect them from unintended scrutiny or harm. The pseudonyms we have chosen for the participants are true to their religious identities. We audio-recorded all the interviews and shared these tapes with them. After we had transcribed the interviews, we shared the transcripts with our participants for respondent validation. We used a systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on the data gathered from multiple data points to identify, analyze, and unpack how girls negotiate their digital engagements in a specific gender-class location.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis reveals that the girls have designed strategies to circumvent the class-gender constraints they face while accessing, managing, and using digital technologies. The first theme discusses girls' everyday strategies to access informational and infrastructural resources including mobile phones at home, computers in schools and families, and even the limited or scarce Internet connection. The second theme unpacks ways in which the girls manage their conduct and participation online. The final theme identifies online practices of social surveillance among girls to regulate the online behavior of the "self-other" in line with the dominant gender-class rationality.

Quotidian Playful Resilience

According to Kleine, Hollow, and Poveda (2013), most of the literature on children's digital media engagement interprets any sign of interest as evidence of the transformative potential of the Internet. This study subverts this politically prescriptive "myth of cyberspace" (Baym, 2010, p. 150) to propose that girls express relative ambivalence toward digital technologies. This is evident in the quotidian strategies of playful resilience to engage with digital technologies from within the class-gender contexts they inhabit. Let us look at an excerpt from our field notes:

> Zenab is a 14-year-old Muslim girl who belongs to a very conservative family. She always covers her face in public. According to her father, girls who have access to digital technologies get spoiled. Unfiltered information can ruin girls [and not boys] because women are emotional and naive. Zenab has a Facebook account she operates anonymously—she never uses her own photos or name. She also uses her account to "stalk" her classmates; this is often accompanied with long arguments on how the "rich" girls who post their photos online have no shame, values, and culture.

Zenab's engagement with digital technologies is influenced by the sociocultural norms dominant in her community. While reinforcing some of these norms, she has also devised ways of negotiating with the dominant culture—which is evident in the practice of creating the anonymous social media account and using it to follow others. Her distancing from the rich girls subscribes to the popular media narrative of the virtuous poor (Arora, 2019a, p. 16), pure from the corruptions of wealth, urbanism, and westernization that come with these former tropes. Her engagement with digital technologies reflects both her submission to the dominant gender and class realities and a sustained desire to create a fraying around the edges of systems for gendered surveillance-discipline.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that the ideology of patriarchy intersects with the conservative and religious norms and low-income class constraints in Zenab's family, thus creating a dominant rationality according to which women should not have unsupervised access to information technologies. If the family can afford one mobile phone with the Internet, the eldest male member of the family owns the limited informational resource. Accordingly, Zenab's father conducts his daughter in ways that reify the authority of this dominant rationality. Zenab's access to and use of mobile phones and social media are constrained by these power relations. Though Zenab overtly embraces these gender-class norms, she also oversteps the authority of her father to access mobile phones and other digital technologies. Zenab's practices are representative of a range of such techniques of negotiating access and participation that we discuss under our proposed QPR concept.

Similar findings from our analysis complicates the assumption that a lack of agency is a position of victimhood. The concept of QPR allows us to think of agency as distributed and situated in the acts of everyday negotiations with the dominant gender-class constraints and norms. Agency is in the ways girls perform acts of (in)visibility in their engagements with and through digital technologies. Agency can be seen in the distributed processes of access, negotiated online participation, and social surveillance.

Theme I: Access to Informational and Infrastructural Resources

Kalyani is a 14-year-old girl who spends most of her time on her rooftop. "The connection to this Wi-Fi network is very strong here," she explained. Kalyani stays in a small apartment complex where the ground-floor flats have been converted into a commercial space for shops and retail business outlets. The ground floor has three coaching classes for aspiring IIT (top Indian technology university) students. Kalyani explains,

> I have friends who go to this coaching class—they also have Wi-Fi—it is free for enrolled students. I just ask my friends for the password. Because this is on the ground floor, road-facing, and my apartment is not on the same side, the Wi-Fi connection from my apartment is weak. On the terrace it is strong—I come here, use it to download things—and then go down and watch them offline.

Many girls like Kalyani develop affordable ways of accessing the Internet. They also share their digital devices with others to reduce the cost incurred by a single person. For instance, all the participants share mobile devices with their family members—especially their parents and siblings. In low-income households, the father and/or grandfather owns a smartphone with the Internet connection, while the mother has only a basic mobile phone. Once the fathers are back from work, the children and mothers may ask for his permission to use the smartphone for several purposes, such as socializing with family and friends, using their social media accounts, browsing the Internet for information or homework, downloading movies and songs, and for other entertainment purposes. Data usage is strictly limited and monitored in each family. Some of the families use unlimited data schemes for their monthly recharge, allowing them to access unlimited data every day. As they can afford only a single recharge worth 500 INR every month, generally only the father's smartphone has an Internet connection. This is what we define as shared connectivity, where girls find ways to share Internet connection with others.

Yukti and her best friend, Priya, study in the same class and often hang out after school hours to complete their class projects. In Yukti's family, only the father owns a smartphone, and he does not allow his children to use his phone for socializing or entertainment. On the other hand, Priya can access her father's laptop with an Internet connection for educational purposes. Yukti and Priya have thus devised a strategy. They meet at Yukti's place once every week under the pretext of completing their class projects and use the time and the allotted Internet to socialize on Facebook. Yukti explains:

> We often tell our parents that we are studying together—at least once every week, and then we use Facebook during that time. Priya does not have a Wi-Fi—they use the data stick, and the amount of data is limited. It is BSNL, and it is not very good. Most of the time, it is so slow, and we have to connect and disconnect all the time!

The term shared connectivity extends our understanding of collective ownership of digital technologies to include instances where access to data packages and Internet usage is limited because of economic constraints or gender restrictions, and girls must find novel strategies to procure Internet connection.

Some of the main strategies the girls across our study have developed include:

     a. Using the limited Internet allowance for co-viewing/stalking/browsing purposes to ensure they can collectively procure more information, especially about what people in their peer networks are up to.

     b. Convincing their parents that they are using the Internet for educational purposes—an upcoming exam, an incomplete assignment, a project deadline, and so on. This allows them to bargain for more time and more Internet data.

     c. Designing techniques to access Internet connections they do not own. For this, they bargain or barter with people for their Internet connection.

Our research participants have identified alternative ways of accessing Internet data and digital devices from their friends and family. For instance, Veronica gets seven rupees per week (or 0.096 dollars) to spend to buy an occasional snack in the school canteen. She spends her pocket money on her classmate: she buys her classmate a few one-rupee road stall candies or packets of Tasty—a popular Indian snack—or a *samosa* as a gift every week for allowing her to be an observer when the classmate browses through her social media accounts on her phone. Like Veronica, Sushmita completes her brother's homework twice a week to be allowed to use his smartphone for an hour every Sunday; Ruksana recharges talk time (INR 50) for one of her father's employees to find out the password of the Wi-Fi at the shop, and so on. Six girls have developed proxy currency to access Internet connections in their friends' houses or through their relatives' and neighbors' devices.

Most of the literature in the information and communication technology fields (Blumenstock & Eagle, 2012; Gurumurthy & Singh, 2009) conceptualizes access to digital technologies within the binary model of individual ownership (evident in societies of the Global North) versus social or communal ownership evident in less-technologized countries of the Global South. Our findings suggest that the boundaries between private and collective ownership are blurred. Collective ownership can, at times, be empowering depending on the nature of the collective or shared parties. Moreover, most of the girls have access to shared digital technologies, but they have devised strategies to use these technologies in ways that allow them to experience privacy and autonomy in meaningful ways.

For instance, Ruksana and her siblings have access to a shared smartphone. Their parents have granted each sibling a time slot to access the phone, and this allotment is dependent on the age of the sibling. The elder sister gets to use the phone for two hours in the day because she is in the 12th grade and is preparing for her board exams. On the other hand, the youngest sibling, Ruksana, gets to spend only 30 minutes on the phone. Access to social media platforms is dependent on both age and gender. Though Ruksana and her sister face severe restrictions on what they can share and do online, they have found ways of circumventing these norms. Ruksana often accesses her social media account on an incognito window; she uses the phone for 30 minutes in the evening when her brothers are not at home, and she sits in the drawing room—back to the wall—so that no one may be suspicious of her online activities. Like Ruksana, many girls sit with notebooks, pens, and pencils when they use the mobile phones or laptops to convince their parents that they are using them for educational purposes.

The concept of shared connectivity can also be broadened to consider how many girls share social media accounts with their parents. In families of the participants, only the father has a WhatsApp account, and the mother and children use the same account to converse and socialize with others. Thirteen girls use their parents' social media accounts while continuing to maintain their personal hidden accounts online. The girls enjoy networking through shared social media accounts but also maintain their privacy and autonomy by creating and using anonymized online profiles. These negotiations between shared connectivity and the need for privacy are often informed by the class norms they inhabit. In the following section, we illustrate how the online presence and activities of these girls stand at an intersection of complicity to the dominant norms and their subversion for individual motives.

Theme II: Negotiated Online Participation

According to Arora and Rangaswamy (2015), marginalized young people access social media, especially Facebook, for aspirational reaching out (i.e., to connect with people beyond their social capital and reach). In a study with youth from a low social-economic-status, Kumar (2014) argued that many young people use social media and digital technologies to circumvent the constraints of their caste-class identities and educational backgrounds and to network with strangers from across the world. We build on these empirical arguments on people's online practices in the Global South to propose that girls do not always strive to circumvent the class-gender norms and constraints they inhabit. Girls occupy a position of in-betweenness (i.e., accepting or reifying the dominant rationality and the associated social rewards while also practicing vigilance to identify opportunities for disobeying the norms when new possibilities of conduct emerge).

Neelima's experience can help us understand how girls practice the analytical trope of "learned helplessness." Neelima is a 15-year-old school-going girl who was engaged to Sashikant in 2017. Her fiancé is a 17-year-old technician working at an automobile shop in Greater Noida. They were supposed to remain engaged for six months so that Neelima could finish her 10th board exams. Before marrying, Neelima wanted to know her fiancé.

> "They [parents] didn't allow me to meet him alone and for a long time—they said if something goes wrong, I will suffer. He will find another girl very easily. They also told me to not talk to him a lot—if I do not talk much, he won't have a problem," she laughed. "But I was not comfortable with this. What if the boy is mad, or like a goon [thug] or something? My parents think they would know the guy but there are so many things about me they do not know!" she explained.

Neelima asked her fiancé to buy her a "secret" mobile phone. He also recharges her data package every month. Shashikant spends 98 rupees from his monthly salary to buy a 12GB data package for Neelima every month. He has access to all her social media accounts, including Facebook and Instagram. He regularly "snoops" through her phone to check who she is texting with and talking to. Though Neelima does not like this practice of online surveillance, she follows the gender rules and expectations that her fiancé lays out for her as a bargain for getting access.

Here, privacy and safety are anchored as sociocultural values, and often the men formalize rules of "normal or proper online conduct" for the women in their lives. Norms to ensure online privacy and safety are defined based on the patriarchal practices of protecting the woman's honor through mechanisms of constraints and restrictions. Yukti's father does not allow her mother to use WhatsApp because he is afraid that "bad men" will find and harass her online. Aju is a 15-year-old girl. Her mother believes, "A phone with Internet will encourage my girls to do wrong things . . . they will talk to boys, make boyfriends, run away with them, and bring shame to the family. They should not have access to phones." Similarly, Veronica's mother believes that the girls are emotional and so they are stupid. They can be easily fooled, unlike boys. Mobile phones with the Internet are a way for strangers to connect with these emotional girls and fool them. As is evident, surveillance of how girls use digital technologies and/or conduct themselves online becomes one of the many modes of preserving traditional morality (Arora & Scheiber, 2017) and the gender-based discrimination.

Most of the girls we interviewed were keenly aware of the male dominance and their subordinate positions in their families, schools, cultures, and societies. They were also aware of the online threats to their safety and privacy. Their negotiations with the dominant gender norms often manifest in the form of (a) overt compliance because of the fear of punishment and (b) concealed-unintended resilience for personal rewards. Like Neelima, Ruksana also comes from a family where the father limits and regulates the online conduct and participation of his wife and daughters. Ruksana's mother is not allowed to watch a show or a movie without the father's approval. Her father believes that media technologies, especially popular culture on the TV and online, can corrupt girls. Though Ruksana's mother is allowed to have a WhatsApp account to talk with her family members, the father regularly checks her phone. Ruksana, her sister, and her mother, however, continue to "find ways to keep him [the father] in the dark."

As they have limited Internet connection at home, Ruksana and her sisters visit her father's shop sometimes to get access to the shop's Wi-Fi connection. They bribe the workers with promises to recharge their phones (from their pocket money) in lieu of the Wi-Fi password. The sisters then download movies and songs, and they watch them together at home when the father is away. Though the sisters reinforce the patriarchal discourse of honor and victim blaming when they argue that "Only a stupid girl will post something online that can tarnish her family's honor," they also continue to access social media and other digital technologies for personal rewards. Many of the girls "slut-shamed" other women who were more active on social media and who openly interacted with others, especially boys. It is critical to note here that "sluttiness" is not tied to "sexual practices but the presence of women in particular spaces and company" (Shah, 2015, para. 3). Girls and women were framed to be of a "loose character" if they posted their photos—especially wearing clothes deemed "scandalous and vulgar," if they posed with male friends and colleagues, if they accepted the friend requests of male students, if boys commented on their photos with "heart" emojis, and so on. The patriarchal imagination of the bodies of girls (and women) is embedded in ideas of purity and contamination, and a "prelapsarian innocence" (Shah, 2015, para. 6) is often corrupted by the touch of technology. Shah (2015) explains,

> This formulation of the body has been a standard narrative that reinforces the idea of the
> woman's body as the marker of purity and chastity which needs to be preserved, and the
> bearer of shame and admonition which it must experience when it transgresses these

norms of propriety. This construction of slut as she who transgresses, persists in the regulation of women's access to technologies, results in absurd policing, such as banning women's access to digital devices. (para. 6)

Girls with a recognizable online presence and voice are often considered to be dishonoring their family traditions and gender norms. Honor is a resource informed by the level of complicity to the dominant gender norms. Questions of honor are indiscriminately tied to gender expectations, and girls are often blamed for bringing disrepute and shame to their families if they challenge the established behavioral codes. It is also critical to note that online risk is framed as a collective burden borne by the family and/or community. Many girls argue that a breach of online privacy—manifested in the form of leaked inappropriate photos or messages, may not only cause unprecedented pain and trauma for the victim of the online bullying or fraud, but it may tarnish the reputation of the entire family. Many mothers we interviewed agreed that they trained their girls to prioritize their family's honor before their personal aspirations, desires, or dreams. Girls have limited and highly surveilled access to digital technologies and are often compelled to discipline their online activities and presence to reify gender norms. Aju's mother explains,

The world is so bad, and the phones give you access to these bad things. I don't want Aju to see bad things—if men and boys find your number, they can send you wrong messages. Aju is a girl—if she posts something bad, the society will blame me—the mother, and not the father. It is the mother's responsibility to teach her daughter the ways of the world and to make her smart so that she can stay safe and away from society's eyes. If something bad happens with Aju online, the entire family will suffer and feel dishonored. Also, we have three daughters. Who will marry them if they think our family is bad!

While examining this patriarchal rationality on female bodies, visibility and participation, and digital technologies, it is important to draw attention to the agentic potential of girls in reifying, circumventing, and/or subverting the existing class-gender boundaries. We argue that the girls surveil their online behavior and presence as well as the conduct of others. As they situate themselves within the power structures around them, they are not only surveilled, but they also surveil others—the girls become the surveilling subjects in the rising surveillance culture. In the following theme, we explain the dynamics of a surveillance culture and how it informs the girls' digital engagements.

Theme III: Social Surveillance

Lyon (2017) introduced the concept of surveillance culture to highlight the role of everyday online practices of millions of users of social media in reifying systems and practices of surveillance in our societies. Systems of surveillance have become an integral and accepted part of subject formation in many data-intensive societies. Not only do people accept surveillance and regulation but they also participate in perpetuating these systems of control and discipline (Albrechtslund, 2008). Girls in our study used the affordances of social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, to initiate surveillance of others. Many girls use their social media accounts to "keep an eye on what others are doing." Yukti explains,

> Doing this helped me understand that one of my close friends was betraying me. She befriended a guy from our class—I had a crush on this guy but he had made fun of me. So, all my girlfriends decided to not talk to him ever—but this girl, she befriended him and was talking to him all day. Even when you have a crush, talking to boys is bad. So, we banned her from the group.

Girls use the phrases stalking, following, updating, keeping an eye on, being in the know-how, and others to describe the online practices they have developed to surveil the conduct of others. These social surveillance mentalities and practices are informed by an understanding of which aspects of visibility in online engagements uphold normative commitments. Girls often use surveillance strategies in playful ways—to follow fashion trends initiated by their classmates who are popular, to find out their classmates' dating and love secrets, to understand their socioeconomic statuses based on the places they visit and post about and the kinds of clothes they wear outside school, and so on. The online practices of liking, commenting, resharing, or messaging are ways in which girls express their approval or disapproval for the content (i.e., the way in which the other female [bodies] are visible on social media, and may contribute to the reification of social [here, gender-class] norms and rationality). The practices of approving, disapproving, criticizing, or gossiping about are embedded in a surveillance culture where girls have access to surveillance tools and techniques and use it to selectively inhabit gender-class norms.

Our observation that girls initiate and participate in the surveillance of others does not mean they do not attempt to create ruptures within this system to ensure personal safety, invisibility, or an online presence that passes the scrutiny of others. Girls who do not have parental approval to use or access social media and other digital technologies often negotiate with the politics of visibility by anonymizing their participation. Nine participants have social media accounts with no visible personal details (i.e., they often use pseudonyms and fake profile photos). These girls do not reveal their online presence to their families or other relatives but continue to use their accounts to monitor the online conduct and practices of their friends and other classmates. Kalyani explains,

> I always logout from my accounts, I do not share my passwords with anyone, I do not share any photos. All I do is look around . . . just through Facebook. I do not use my phone or FB to talk to people, but I use it to keep an eye and be aware of what is happening in their lives. It reaffirms my belief that youngsters have lost their sense of direction—always wasting time and losing their values posting on Facebook.

Stoddart (2012) explores in/visibility as a strategy of controlling one's situatedness and position within social spaces. In/visibility is not a withdrawal from the public realm; it is an effective strategy of performing engagement without presence, of observing without being observed, and of dealing with multiple, varying, and/or conflicting identities and experiences. As is evident, girls' participation in the surveillance culture unsettles the binary of "compliance or resistance" and allows us to explore multiple ways, formats, and subtlety of responses informed by their personal aspirations and lived realities.

Marwick (2012) explains that the use of social media is characterized by the practice of stalking, watching, creeping, gazing, or looking. This process of social surveillance begins with the proposition that

power is constitutive (i.e., operating at the micro and individual level and implies that surveillance takes place between individuals, rather than between governing/macro organizations of power and individuals). The practice of lurking on social media to gather information about the other is a strategy of social surveillance and, though it may seem a passive practice, we argue that many girls adopt this as a defensive strategy to reaffirm their belief in the cultural norms they inhabit; they often shame, reprimand, gossip about, and/or brand other girls who do not follow these gender norms.

Rizwana wants to experience freedom—she wants greater access to mobile phones with the Internet, but she also believes that girls who share a lot of their personal information on social media, especially their photos, are immoral. Discussing the choices she makes to self-discipline her presence-participation on social media and her access to digital technologies, she explains,

> In rich societies, girls can do anything, and no one will blame them. For people from my society, those girls are of weak character. I do not want to be like them. I want to use the phone but just to see what others are doing . . . maybe like their photos so that they know I am also on social media.

While surveilling others, Veronica reifies the gender-class norms in the ways she makes sense of "rich girls using social media." Many other participants reiterated the process of lurking on other girls' social media to observe what they were doing and, in the process, "shamed" the other girls for noncompliance with the normativized gender norms of visibility and participation. While discussing online threats, safety, and "eavesdropping," closely observing other people's social media activities and conversations, many girls argued that if anyone's privacy is breached, it is the woman's fault. As Nausheen, a 14-year-old girl from Delhi, explained,

> Why do you share your photos—obviously, you want people to see and then you blame them for seeing? Are you that stupid to share your photos online . . . photos can be misused. Do you know what boys do with these photos of girls in their private time? Chiiii. I would never want to be that type of girl, you know!

Class and gender identities inform the politics of visibility dominant in their societies. Digital technologies can steal their "haya" (modesty) if they are exposed in an inappropriate way online. This includes the sharing of personal photos or any other kind of information revealing that girls are socializing with boys or men, wearing revealing clothes, hanging out in public spaces in mixed-gender groups, and so on. According to these norms, girls from low-income families embrace "haya" (modesty) as their key virtue, frequently leveraging upon it to create moral superiority over girls from higher-income families. By building their haya through consistent online social surveillance and condemning wealthier girls who depart from the gendered norms, these girls can succeed in gaining further digital access.

This does not mean that these girls do not practice any or all these forms of conduct. Many girls frequently chat with boys and date them, visit places with their groups in the after-school or coaching-class hours, and wear clothes they like. Priya, a 13-year-old girl, said,

4768 Bhatia, Arora, and Pathak-Shelat

International Journal of Communication 15(2021)

> It is simple . . . wear kurta and jeans when you leave home and carry a sleeveless top in your bag. I just go to my friend's house—her parents are not very strict—and change into my sleeveless top. All I must do is be sure not to post anything online, make sure my friends don't tag me in their posts, and no one from my neighborhood or family sees me and takes my photo.

In this surveillance culture, digital technologies are used as tools of archiving "abnormal" practices to punish and discipline those who fail to submit to the dominant rationality. Girls, therefore, actively practice invisibility while continuing to monitor the conduct of others. This observation allows us to extend our understanding of the concept of "social surveillance" that identifies reciprocity as a central tenet, arguing that "people who engage in social surveillance also produce online content that is surveilled by others" (Marwick, 2012, p. 382). We argue that girls are aware of the surveillance potential of digital technologies and how this culture is animated by the intentionality of disciplining class and gendered subjects into compliance. They actively choose to surveil others while remaining anonymous and absent. Through QPR, they both reify the class-gender norms while continually trying to evade its power to suppress them into compliance. Remaining invisible, not producing content, anonymizing participation, and acting as surveilling subjects while resisting the possibility of being surveilled are some of the ways in which girls negotiate their digital engagements.

QPR Is an Inclusive Framework

We define QPR as playful enactments of subversive strategies negotiating the authority of gender-class power relations in the society. Girls are socialized to conduct themselves in ways that reify the dominant rationality (Foucault, 1977) of gender and class. These two social identities emerge as the regimes of thought and practice that entail the subjectification of girls as norm-reinforcing individuals. We extend this Foucauldian theorization to argue that the process of subject formation is a constitutive and not a coercive process. When girls agree to marshal their body capacities to reinforce gender-class norms, they are, in essence, choosing their conducts in a specific way. We argue that many girls use their will to sometimes circumvent these dominant regimes of practices in playful ways.

In conceptualizing QPR as a salient aspect of girls' engagement with digital technologies, we have borrowed theoretical force from Kraidy's (2016) idea of creative insurgencies. According to Kraidy (2016), the process of challenging systems of power requires emergent, personalized, and heterogeneous enactments of resistance practiced and often incorporated in routines and everyday experiences. He encourages us to examine resistance as a personalized and creative technique of deploying the "self" toward determinate political goals. We argue that "creative insurgencies" are largely intentional and organized and may not be relevant in situations that are not overly political. We propose the concept of QPR to examine contexts and situations in which resistance is not associated with a politically prescriptive project or motivation. In situations where people circumvent the dominant norms for aspirational purposes or for leisure, they seldom define their strategies of resilience as politically motivated or resistive in nature. We propose that QPR can be a useful theoretical framework to examine these quotidian acts of will and desires. The QPR framework does not negate the political potential of strategies young girls design to circumvent sociocultural and other constraints. Instead, the QPR framework creates space to acknowledge and accommodate the complexity integral to questions of

agency and autonomy as girls purposely choose to negotiate between resistance and compliance, depending on the particular circumstances they encounter and environments they inhabit. Using the QPR framework also ensures that the scholars privilege the explanations extended by the participants who refuse to identify their digital engagements as political and/or subversive.

The concept of QPR is a meta practice that informs how girls access, use, and navigate digital technologies—including the infrastructural affordances and limitations and the realm of the digitalscape. Examining QPR is critical for four reasons:

1. It is a tactical way of understanding the existing gender-class constraints while also circumventing them through manipulative techniques of resistance.

2. "Risk-taking" can be kept to a minimum, thus reducing the severity of the punishment for defying the dominant norms.

3. It is dynamic and emergent and can be altered spontaneously to meet the changing infrastructural requirements and sociocultural expectations.

4. It is personalized, creative, and unpredictable—enabling girls to both reinforce the norms overtly while creating tension within the systems through their personal engagements with technologies and people.

QPR allows us to chart the unknown theoretical boundaries between submission (to the dominant rationality) and the aspirational reaching out (Arora & Rangaswamy, 2015) to create different possibilities of conduct. It involves examining young girls' digital engagements both as a strategic preservation of the dominant norms of conduct and sustained-quotidian efforts to change the "force relations" (Davidson, 2011, p. 27) pervading the existing power hierarchies in their societies. Force is defined as any element in a relation that affects the way power is distributed among people and influences their experiences, interactions with others, and the normativized ways in which they can conduct themselves and others.

QPR allows us to capture the problematics of subjectivation and agency from a gender-class lens. It is helpful in developing an ethnographic approach that is critical to appreciating the extent of diversity in girls' lived realities.

Conclusion

Our ethnographic study helps substantiate the concept of QPR with empirical evidence. According to this concept, acts of resilience are anchored in resistive intentionality enacted through play. Contexts and phenomena, where tactical interventions to transcend authority are not always designed to attain political goals, compel us to broaden our understanding of resistance. The findings highlight the need to carve social praxis ecologies that are not just tethered to the "rules of the game" but have a way of becoming. We suggest developing epistemes of knowledge and ontologies of practice that are reflexive to the dialectical tensions of engaging with digital technologies. This may include negotiating with seemingly uncomfortable

complex modernities and lived experiences of children situated between the global discourse on development and the more local societal norms. Many research studies examine the ways in which girls create an online presence focus on highlighting how girls practice abstinence from these "Western" or "male" platforms, but very few pursue how girls can subscribe to the dominant systems of knowledge and practice, such as the existing gender-norms in their societies, class expectations, religious morals, and so on, while accessing digital technologies. A nuanced, context-specific approach may help identify how girls reify the existing norms while also operating along the axis of transnational agencies as they devise new ways of accessing and using digital technologies, especially the Internet.

The study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital leisure and playfulness, self-expression, self-actualization, and creative enactments in the long considered "serious" pursuits of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination in the broader pursuit to humanize the "other." Our work encourages scholars to take the quotidian and push for "provocative generalizability" (Fine, 2012, p. 420), as these forces can create low-lying but much-needed intellectual seismic shifts. As Arora (2019b) explains, "We need to escape the dilemma between isolated provincial particularisms and abstract universalisms on privacy by deepening reflexivity and our political imagination of locations, articulations, and movements at the margins" (p. 6).

References

Albrechtslund, A. (2008). Online networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday, 13*(3). doi:10.5210/fm.v13i3.2142

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

Arora, P. (2019b). Decolonizing privacy studies. *Television & New Media, 20*(4), 366–378. doi:10.1177/1527476418806092

Arora, P., & Rangaswamy, N. (2013). Digital leisure for development: Reframing new media practice in the Global South. *Media, Culture & Society, 35*(7), 898–905. doi:10.1177/0163443713495508

Arora, P., & Rangaswamy, N. (2015). Digital romance in the Indian city. *City & South Asia, 2*, 73.

Arora, P., & Scheiber, L. (2017). Slumdog romance: Facebook love and digital privacy at the margins. *Media, Culture & Society, 39*(3), 408–422. doi:10.1177/0163443717691225

Baviskar, A., & Ray, R. (2011). *Elite and everyman*. New Delhi, India: Routledge.

Baym, N. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. London, UK: Polity.

Betts, L., & Spencer, K. (2019). "Just for fun?": An exploration of digital games' potential for eudaimonic media experiences among Flemish adolescents. *Journal of Children and Media, 14*(3), 285–301. doi:10.1080/17482798.2020.1727934

Bhatia, K., & Pathak-Shelat, M. (2018). Media experiences in community driven rural areas: Exploring children's media cultures in rural Gujarat, India. *Journal of Children and Media, 13*(3), 260–275. doi:10.1080/17482798.2019.1616575

Bhatia, K., & Pathak-Shelat, M. (2019). *Challenging discriminatory practices of religious socialization among adolescents: Critical media literacy and pedagogies in practice*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave.

Blumenstock, J., & Eagle, N. (2012). Divided we call: Disparities in access and use of mobile phones in Rwanda. *Information Technologies & International Development, 8*(2), 1–16. Retrieved from https://itidjournal.org/index.php/itid/article/view/894.html

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cassidy, W., Faucher, C., & Jackson, M. (2013). Cyberbullying among youth: A comprehensive review of current international research and its implications and applications to policy and practice. *School Psychology International, 34*(6), 575–616. doi:10.1177/0143034313479697

Chatterjee, S., Majumdar, D., Misra, S., & Damaševičius, R. (2020). Adoption of mobile applications for teaching-learning process in rural girls' schools in India: An empirical study. *Education and Information Technologies, 25*(5), 4057–4076. doi:10.1007/s10639-020-10168-6

Cortesi, S., & Gasser, U. (Eds.). (2015). *Digitally connected: Global perspectives on youth and digital media*. Harvard, MA: Berkman Center Research.

Davidson, A. (2011). In praise of counter-conduct. *History of Human Sciences, 24*(4), 25–41. doi:10.1177/0952695111411625

Diwakar, V. (2016). 'It's complicated': The construction of Indian middle-class teens in social media. *Journal of Creative Communications, 11*(2), 161–182. doi:10.1177/0973258616644813

Fine, G. A., & Sandstrom, K. L. (1988). *Knowing children: Participant observation with minors*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.

Fine, M. (2012). Resuscitating critical psychology for 'revolting' times. *Journal of Social Issues, 68*(2), 416–438. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01756.x

Finkelhor, D., Walsh, K., Jones, L., Mitchell, K., & Collier, A. (2020). Youth Internet safety education: Aligning programs with the evidence base. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. doi:10.1177/1524838020916257

Fisher, S., & Jenson, J. (2015). Producing alternative gender orders: A critical look at girls and gaming. *Learning, Media and Technology, 42*(1), 87–99. doi:10.1080/17439884.2016.1132729

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline & punish*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Gurumurthy, A., & Singh, P. J. (2009). *ICTD: Is it a new species of development?* (IT for Change Perspective Paper). Retrieved from https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/41794

Hesse-Biber, S. (2012). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Kleine, D., Hollow, D., & Poveda, S. (2013). *Children, ICT and development: Capturing the potential, meeting the challenges*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF.

Kraidy, M. (2016). *The naked blogger of Cairo: Creative insurgency in the Arab world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kumar, N. (2014). Facebook for self-empowerment? A study of Facebook adoption in urban India. *New Media & Society, 16*(7), 1122–1137. doi:10.1177/1461444814543999

Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. (2015). Annual research review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies: The nature, prevalence and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 55*(6), 635–654. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12197

Lyon, D. (2017). Surveillance culture: Engagement, exposure, and ethics in digital modernity. *International Journal of Communication, 11*, 824–842.

Marwick, A. (2012). The public domain: Surveillance in everyday life. *Surveillance & Society, 9*(4), 378–393. doi:10.24908/ss.v9i4.4342

Nemer, D., & Freeman, D. (2015). Empowering the marginalized: Rethinking selfies in the slums of Brazil. *International Journal of Communication, 9*, 1832–1847.

Pathak-Shelat, M., & DeShano, C. (2014). Digital youth cultures in small town and rural Gujarat, India. *New Media & Society, 16*(6), 983–1001. doi:10.1177/1461444813496611

Postill, J., & Pink, S. (2012), Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web. *Media International Australia, 145*(1), 123–134. doi:10.1177/1329878X1214500114

Rangaswamy, N., & Cutrell, E. (2013). Anthropology, development and ICTs: Slums, youth, and the mobile Internet in urban India. *Information Technologies & International Development, 9*(2), 51–63. doi:10.1145/2160673.2160685

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory, 14*(3), 305–323. doi:10.1177/1464700113499853

Shah, N. (2015). Sluts 'r' us: Intersection of gender, protocol and agency in the digital age. *First Monday, 20*(4). Retrieved from https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5463/4415

Shaw, F. (2013). These wars are personal: Methods and theory in online feminist research. *Qualitative Research Journal, 13*(1), 90–101. doi:10.1108/14439881311314649

Skeggs, B. (1995). Theorising, ethics and representation in feminist ethnography. In B. Skeggs (Ed.), *Feminist cultural theory: Process and production* (pp. 190–207). Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Stoddart, E. (2012). A surveillance of care: Evaluating surveillance ethically. In K. Ball, K. Haggerty, & D. Lyon (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of surveillance studies* (pp. 669–676). London, UK: Routledge.

Suoranta, J., & Lehtimaki, H. (2004). *Children in the information society: The case of Finland*. London, UK: Peter Lang.

Tacchi, J., Kitner, K., & Crawford, K. (2012). Meaningful mobility. *Feminist Media Studies, 12*(4), 528–537. doi:10.1080/14680777.2012.741869

Taft, J. (2011). *Rebel girls: Youth activism & social change across the Americas*. New York, NY: New York University Press.