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LIVELIHOOD-RELATED INTERNET USE AMONG LOW-PRIVILEGED YOUNG MEN IN KOLKATA

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There are stark inequalities in opportunities for employment in India, mainly shaped by the level, quality, and source of formal education. This is particularly disadvantageous for graduates from low-cost government institutions compared to expensive private ones (Yagnamurthy, 2021), the inequalities having widened particularly after the liberalization of the economy in 1991. Their disadvantage has coincided in recent times with the of mobile Internet use in India (see G.S.M.A., 2021, 2023) and a simultaneous rise of the democratization and diversity of content in social media, where creators, relying on a platform's monetization model (see e.g., YouTube, 2023), provide many materials, including livelihood skills or information for free. These, in theory, can help many resource-poor consumers to broaden their life chances by pursuing livelihood-related resources.

Previous research regarding digital industries has discussed the cultural change (e.g., Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Magaudda & Solaroli, 2020) and precarious implications for the creators of these *products* (e.g., Duffy, 2016; Scholz, 2009). Studies on effectiveness of online learning has focused on Indonesian students in classroom settings (Maziriri et al., 2020; Rahmatika et al., 2021) and on autonomous English-learning in Taiwan (Wang & Chen, 2020). However, it is also important to know about the social and gendered contexts of specific population groups in other settings and how they shape goal-oriented uses of the Internet and the achievement of such goals.

This qualitative study investigates how urban young men of low-privileged backgrounds in Kolkata (in eastern India) access digital content, mostly on YouTube, to acquire skills for and information about income opportunities in the face of a lack of access to quality institutions. It also asks whether and how the outcomes of such Internet use are shaped by their specific life contexts which may also influence the scope of application of such information. This study is based on blended ethnography (see e.g., Hine, 2017), and uses digital divides (see Ragnedda et al., 2023; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2017) and

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domestication theory (see e.g., Haddon, 2017; Hartmann, 2023) as analytical frameworks.

The research discusses the experiences of 20 young men in Kolkata who speak Bengali as native language, have had personal smartphones for at least a year and studied in government-owned or government-aided schools due to the financial constraints of their family which made affording private education impossible. The off-line data is collected through in-person participant observations, ethnographic interviews, home visits and participation in their social life. Digital data is collected from 1-to-1 online conversations and screenshots of YouTube pages like subscriptions, liked videos, favourite channels etc. and other relevant apps/websites. Data collection lasted from October 2023 till June 2024.

All participants have stated their unhappiness with the government institutes in failing to provide them with job skills and linkages with desired jobs in a market where the demand far outstrips the supply of decent jobs, reflected in the high unemployment rate among the educated in India (see The Indian Express, 2023). They spoke of normalised gendered expectations from their families and (future) female partners on them to earn respectably and well. Most of them have sought solutions through the smartphone-Internet which has involved numerous complexities.

Dipesh, a 21-year-old man pursuing Bachelor of Computer Applications, despite bad grades, in a private college, struggles to cope with the demands on learning programming languages and the male-centric income expectations of his low-income family. He has tried to learn English for future job interviews and coding for his course by 'subscribing' to free vernacular channels on YouTube. However, the exhausting but low-quality classes at college only hinder him from regular engagement with online learning. Inspired from YouTube videos, he also harbours lofty unrealistic aspirations of passing the most competitive civil service examinations in India. Shyam, 19, once a meritorious student, was preparing from free YouTube channels to pursue Engineering after school as his family could not afford private tuition. He learned on YouTube about a public examination for a low-paying but secure Governmental position at the post office. When he passed the relevant examination, he had to choose this over Engineering dreams because of immediate monetary needs of his family.

Karim, 19, through sheer determination and financial support from relatives, has completed online courses on digital graphics design, media editing etc. but has only found irregular low-income work opportunities. Sourish, 26 and unemployed, was desperate for a job after failing to pursue a sports career and got cheated at an online platform with fake offers and now distrusts looking for jobs online. His motivation to look for online opportunities is often thwarted by male-centric gaming and sexual distractions online. Raunak, 20, aspires to start *dropshipping*, a form of online retail after learning about it online, but afraid of the risk due to lack of contacts in this domain. Rijul, 20, currently unemployed, on the other hand, has found irregular low-income employment from offline connections in the past without any need to use online sources.

The desire for upward mobility motivates the participants to go online to search for fitting opportunities. Using affordable Internet resources, the young men exercise their agency

to attempt to fill the deficiencies of formal institutions and their limited access to offline social/cultural/economic capital. This indicates some success in overcoming of the second digital divide, although not uniformly. Limited offline capitals in the form of language barriers, low knowledge of effective use of the Internet, lack of relatable role models, high scepticism in investing money etc. recreate in newer ways the previous limitations of their offline life as the accessible online opportunities look steep, unreliable or uncertain.

In line with the third digital divide, these findings reveal greater obstacles in the efficacy of applying livelihood-related online resources in terms of the nature of livelihoods sought, availability of energy and time, social expectations, and the availability of avenues for finding lesser employment via offline ties. As this actively influences 'digital empowerment' (see Ragnedda et al., 2023, p. 29), I aim to argue that the extent of divide (second or third) is not uniform for one individual in a population group but varies with each purposive use depending on personal interests and social factors that facilitate/hinder success in specific directions. Negotiations of these divides underpin their everyday processes of domestication and re-domestication (see Berker et al., 2006; Peil & Röser, 2023) on an individual level (see Berker, 2023). Additionally, as they grapple with making the best of digital resources for life chances, the role and responsibility of institutions, especially the government, receding to the back seat in a market-driven economy is further normalized.

While generalisations are impossible, we see the general connections of online use with offline contexts, which determine the success of the life chances of the young men. This research contributes both to knowledge of digital experiences from the Global South and extends the theories of domestication of digital technology and digital divides to youth in low privilege settings. The final paper will provide detailed ethnographic insights into the lives of the young men to also discuss the balance between various uses of the internet; for skills and for entertainment, and how they negotiate the challenges of digital industries offering them a mix of both, but which only some of them can utilize to enhance their life chances.

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