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## **CULTURE-CENTRED DIGITAL DESIGN: FOREGROUNDING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES**

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### **Introduction**

One in three new users of the internet is a child, and, whilst digital divides and access inequalities persist for many (International Telecommunications Union, 2023), children are coming online at the fastest rate in the global South (Livingstone, Carr & Byrne, 2016). Children and young people (defined here as those aged 9 - 24, referred hereafter as 'young people') in the global South stand to benefit enormously from the digital environment (Third & Moody, 2021), yet their needs, rights and aspirations rarely influence the design and operation of digital platforms and services (Livingstone, Third & Lansdown, 2021; Lenhart and Owens, 2021). Indeed, digital platforms are predominantly designed by, and for, Western audiences, disproportionately representing and reproducing the dominance of white, educated, industrialised, rich, and developed

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perspectives (Herman & Arora, 2023). The dominance of global North cultural perspectives reifies a colonised internet and drives media imperialism. Research suggests this can marginalise or suppress the experiences and identities of other groups; expose children to content that infringes and potentially erodes cultural values; perpetuates the power imbalances of internet governance; imposes structures that extract value from marginalised nations; and subtly influences homogenisation towards Western-centric, capitalist assumptions and conventions (Iliadis et al., 2023; Bon et al., 2022; Tripathi, 2021; Couldry & Meijas, 2019). Moreover, young people's experiences reflect these tendencies: many in the global South cannot access content in a language they speak, and they do not see themselves or their cultures represented in the online content they encounter (Third & Moody, 2021). A lack of attention to the very diverse contexts in which young people engage with digital technologies around the world inhibits their access, exposes them to heightened risk of harm and injustice, prevents them from maximising the many benefits the digital environment offers for their health, wellbeing and future prospects (Livingstone & Third, 2017) and may diminish their abilities to harness digital technologies for self-expression, creativity and empowerment, and to disrupt top-down hierarchies and imbalances (Herman & Arora, 2023). These conditions compromise the safety and rights of young people in relation to the digital environment.

Decolonisation of digital design requires the rupturing of rapidly sedimenting design practices of global platforms and services with international reach. Promoting equitable, inclusive, and empowering online environments for young people globally requires a concerted effort to foreground youth-centred perspectives and to centre *culture* in the design and development of the platforms, services and content they engage with.

## **Research questions**

Young people are calling for a better internet that is inclusive, safe and respectful (Third & Moody, 2021) where they can access culturally relevant content (ibid) and be acknowledged as users of digital products and platforms. Designers themselves recognise the system needs to change to respond to the needs and perspectives of diverse young people (Lenhart & Owens, 2021). Whilst existing frameworks support digital design that realises children's rights (e.g., Livingstone & Pothong, 2023), and human-centred design principles can guide designers to address users' needs, there is currently no clear, practical framework to enable the diverse perspectives of underrepresented young people to inform culturally safe and inclusive design.

This research is grounded on a culture-centred approach, which seeks to consider diverse cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of young people (Tzenis, 2020) and to "invert the erasure of subaltern communities" by actioning the lived experiences of communities and by reflexively interrogating positions of power (Dutta, 2008).

This paper discusses a pilot that explores:

- What does culture-centred design mean to diverse children and young people? What are their experiences of culture-blind design?
- What are the differences and similarities between young people in diverse geo-political, class and geographic contexts?

## **Methodology**

A decolonised, youth-centred approach was adopted to challenge dominant discourses and hierarchies of knowledge production. Distributed Data Generation (DDG) (Third et al., 2021) - a participatory workshop based methodology - entailed collaboration between research centres in Australia and India, and a non-profit youth organisation in Indonesia. Cross-cultural partnerships ensured that the agenda was informed by local expertise, unsettling Western assumptions about what constitutes research, accepted methodologies, knowledges, and their representation.

DDG centres marginalised perspectives and knowledge, and has been used to collaborate with global South organisations to facilitate rights-based youth research. Participatory approaches support the decolonisation of knowledge about youth by co-producing knowledge *with* children and young people (Varga, 2011) and address child–adult power imbalances (Kustatscher, et al., 2022).

This research engaged 128 9- to 18-year-olds in Australia, India and Indonesia from urban and rural locations, culturally and linguistically diverse, migrant background, and low socio-economic and disadvantaged communities. Each participant took part in a 3-3.5 hour workshop, participating in activities to explore expressions of culture, ethics and responsibilities, and aspirations for culture-centred digital design.

## **Findings**

Findings indicate how digital technology use influences and shapes the cultural practices of young people across Australia, India, and Indonesia, and sheds light on the diverse digital experiences of culturally diverse young people.

For Indian participants in particular, ‘culture’ is viewed through lenses of nationalism, ideology and everyday practices. In contrast, children in Australia identify culture with material practices and phenomena, such as the environment. These differences are also reflected in the ways children conceptualise the influence of the digital on their sense of culture. For Indian participants, their digital consumption practices reinforce what it meant to be ‘Indian’. By contrast, Australian participants tend to see themselves as part of a multicultural society, finding it challenging to pinpoint a shared ‘Australian’ culture. Across countries, children report that digital technologies can strengthen cultural identity and cross-cultural understanding, though some express concern that minority cultures are under-represented online.

Indian and Indonesian young people harness digital platforms to learn about their own, and other cultures, particularly through online games and social media. Whilst some

Australian participants enjoy watching international content creators online, for them, benefits associated with learning or exploring other cultures are not as apparent.

Indian and Indonesian children often encounter digital experiences that exclude, diminish or ignore their cultural norms and beliefs. Indian participants provided examples of Western-centric game design, observing that Minecraft does not acknowledge culturally significant events and causes moral tensions for Hindu players. Indonesian and Indian participants expressed concern about inappropriate content, that is sexual in nature, degrading, or which disrespects traditions or religion. Many experienced using platforms that did not offer local languages.

Many participants from across countries are concerned that digital technologies can facilitate cultural stereotyping and cultural appropriation, resulting in “digital disharmony”. Indian participants focused on context-specific examples, such as Indians being associated with scammers’ culture or fake news about Hindu-Muslim conflict inspiring social disharmony. By contrast, Australian participants highlighted patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, anti-minority sentiments characterising casual racism that surfaces online.

Some Indian participants expressed concern that the digital might make people “forget” their culture and moral values (e.g., honesty). In comparison, most Australian participants did not identify experiences where the digital undermines their culture.

Despite the deep imbrication of digital technology with the reproduction of culture, most participants found it difficult to explain the connection between digital technologies and culture, highlighting the embeddedness of technology in everyday cultural practices. These findings indicate the need to adopt culture-centred, inclusive digital design approaches that account for the lived experiences of diverse children and young people’s, not just those in the global North.

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