EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Context

Since its inception, the internet has slowly and steadily become an integral part of people's daily lives worldwide. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to understand how it impacts children growing up in this digital age. On the one hand, prior research reveals multiple physiological adverse impacts of digital engagement on children resulting in addictive behaviours and impaired cognitive functioning. There is also evidence of negative outcomes on adolescents' mental health and well-being. On the other hand, digital engagement has provided adolescents with multiple avenues: to aid in socio-emotional development; to expand knowledge and social connections; for skill development; to mitigate loneliness; and to even promote well-being, among others.

Research in the Indian context, including Karnataka, has validated the positive and negative impacts of digital engagement on children. The digital world is here to stay. Hence, the need to find ways to enable and empower children to navigate the online world safely and leverage its benefits.

Aim

This study seeks to obtain an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the nature of adolescents' digital engagement, with the goal of maximising its positive aspects and mitigating its negative impacts to promote healthy and responsible online interaction.

Methodology

This study followed a **mixed-methods approach**, where qualitative (Participatory Action Research and Focus Group Discussions; In-Depth Interviews) and quantitative methods of data collection (Survey) were used to obtain information from three key stakeholders: adolescents, their parents and teachers. These stakeholders can collaboratively enable healthy digital engagement. Hence, the need to understand whether synergies exist between them.

Five diverse categories of co-educational schools were identified: Learning Centre for Children with Diverse Needs; Rural Government School; Urban Government School; Urban International School; and Urban Private School. The adolescents from these schools were grouped into three cohorts and two groups. Their age range was 10 to 16/17 years.

Data from these stakeholders were triangulated to arrive at a comprehensive understanding.

Age of Digital Engagement - A Portal to the Digital World

Regarding the age of initiating digital engagement, 42 percent of the parents (24) reported that this occurred between the **ages of 12 and 14** (the ideal age being at least 12 years, according to prior research). It needs mention that most of these were children with diverse needs; children from rural and urban government schools; and the urban private school. The teachers also concurred with the parents. The data revealed a **mismatch between parents' beliefs and actions**. 53 percent of them (30) believed 15 years and above to be the ideal age to initiate digital engagement, but only two parents followed through with this. Similarly, 79 percent of them (45) believed 16 years and above to be the ideal age to possess one's own device, but 47 percent of them (27) had already given their children a device before the age of 16. Early digital engagement and device possession were predominantly observed in children from the urban international school.

Synergies prevailed between children and parents on when device possession occurred, but the teachers seemed to be less aware of this aspect.

Nature of Digital Engagement

This domain attempted to understand **why** children went online, and **what** they did online. The reasons why children went online dictated what they did online. Some of the major reasons why children went online were for educational purposes; to build on their skills; for entertainment; to socialise; to receive validation; to address emotional issues; to shop; for personal expression; to build on hobbies; to prevent the fear of missing out (FOMO); to relax, and sometimes, to find job opportunities. To do so, they accessed multiple platforms, including YouTube; over-the-top (OTT) platforms; social media; educational websites; and multiple gaming platforms.

The parents and teachers provided a broad, rather than an in-depth understanding of children's digital engagement. At times, they were even unaware of some of the information the children shared. They were most aware of children's online educational engagement, but far less aware of more concerning aspects, such as the predominance of violent online game play. Thus, large knowledge gaps prevail within this domain.

Adolescents' Engagement with Offline Activities

Children engaged in a myriad of offline activities, which **96 percent of the parents (55)** agreed with. **Sports** was the most common offline activity, followed by **spending time with friends and family**, and engaging in **creative activities**, such as reading, art and dance. A vast majority of the children preferred to spend time offline, but a glance at the amount of time they spent offline versus online shows that **online time predominates**. As children advanced in age, their online time showed a steady increase, but this was not observed with

their offline time. Thus, for many children, the allure of the online world is far greater than that of the offline world, especially in the case of boys. Children from the urban international and urban private schools spent a higher amount of time online, which was reflected in the parents' responses, as well.

Impact of Digital Engagement

Children's online engagement has resulted in multiple positive impacts. This study revealed that the key reasons that make children engage digitally (mentioned above) are because they **actively seek** some of these **positive aspects**. In addition to the details mentioned above, the children and parents also mentioned a few more positive impacts: being online has helped **build life skills**; given them **access to different kinds of lifestyles**; and helped **build language skills**.

Children expressed weariness regarding the **negative impacts** of their online engagement. Some of the major ones being that it had put a **strain on their relationships** with friends and family; led to a **decline in their academic performance**; **cut down on their sleep and offline time**; left them **feeling trapped**; led them to make **unhealthy comparisons** with people online; and given them access to **inappropriate content**. There was also mention of **cyberbullying**, **hacking** and experiences of the **fear of missing out (FOMO)**.

The parents and teachers agreed with some, but not all of the positive and negative impacts that the children listed. The parents had a better understanding of the positive impacts, compared to the negative impacts. This was not always the case with teachers, who brought to light concerning negative impacts that were not mentioned by the children or the parents. Thus, **poor synergies** prevail between the **three key stakeholders** in this domain, as well.

Monitoring Mechanisms and their Efficacy

Parents employed a multitude of monitoring approaches to (or in an attempt to) keep their children's online engagement in check. Most parents (98% - 51) use **time-based monitoring mechanisms**. Several children and some teachers additionally mentioned that parents use **violence and threats** to control their online engagement, which the parents made no mention of. Some children **self-regulated** their online engagement, but were not always successful in their efforts.

53 percent of the parents (27) felt that children responded positively to being monitored, but the **children** vividly expressed their feelings of **discontentment** towards being monitored, as parents' methods **lacked empathy and understanding**. Children had even found ways to circumvent these monitoring mechanisms, rendering them ineffective.

Most children did not believe their parents to be role models in terms of digital engagement, even though 91 percent of the parents (52) felt that they could do so. However, many parents stated that they require inputs to enable safe digital engagement in children, which could foster open communication, and adoption of more child-friendly support mechanisms, as opposed to a largely controlling approach, currently being used by many parents.

Inputs for Enabling Safe Digital Engagement

All children had received some inputs on safe digital engagement at their school, other than some children from the rural and urban government schools. According to most children, these inputs were **generic**, and most often not relevant or useful to them. However, the parents and teachers believed otherwise, indicating gaps in their perception.

Parents and teachers believed that the school had an important role to play in enabling safe digital engagement. From their responses, it was evident that they were interested in being part of awareness sessions and peer support groups organised by schools.

Parents and teachers believed that student-led initiatives should be introduced in schools in order to promote safe digital engagement. However, this was of least interest to the adolescents, as they did not feel comfortable telling other children what to do.

Awareness of Laws and Policies Surrounding Cyber Safety

Only **9 percent of the parents (5)**, and **none of the teachers** had an understanding of the laws, policies and redressal mechanisms around cyber safety that are applicable to children. Most of the teachers, and 54 percent of the parents (31) were interested in receiving this information. Access to this information could be beneficial in case of adverse online experiences that require reporting and legal interventions. Schools can take the initiative to impart education on this.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study revealed that from the three key stakeholders, the **adolescents had the most detailed understanding of their digital engagement**. In most of the aspects, parents and teachers had an overall sense of the children's perspectives, but they seldom had a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of their perspectives. Therefore, there is a need to build bridges to eliminate the gaps in stakeholder perceptions. This can enable healthy digital engagement. The following recommendations have been put forth towards this end.

Parents can:

- maintain open communication channels with children

- mindfully guide children's digital engagement from a young age, and customise it to suit different ages, personalities and interests of the children
- guide children towards self-regulation
- enable children to develop a sense of self that is not determined or dictated by the online world
- collaborate with their children to identify suitable offline activities
- act as role models

Parents and teachers can:

- secure a measure of digital literacy
- focus on mentoring
- support children with diverse needs
- provide children with a holistic education on online safety that pertains to not just the technical aspects, but also the experiential aspects and how the associated emotions can be managed
- learn to recognise signs of digital dependency and related mental health issues