International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Safeguarding Children's Digital Consumption: Navigating Online Fraud, Ai Manipulation, and Gaming Influence in Post-Pandemic India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and recurring environmental crises such as Delhi's hazardous air quality levels have forced an unprecedented shift toward online education, dramatically increasing children's screen time and digital dependency. This paper examines how emergency-driven digitalization has exposed children to heightened risks including online fraud, AI manipulation, gaming addiction, and behavioral changes shaped by digital content. Through secondary analysis of existing policies, programs, and frameworks including India's National Education Policy 2020, Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, and international child protection mechanisms, this research evaluates the adequacy of current safeguards. Drawing on published empirical data from the COVID-19 and Delhi AQI crisis periods, the study documents how prolonged online learning and gaming engagement affects children's information consumption patterns, social behaviors, and vulnerability to digital threats. The findings reveal significant policy-implementation gaps and propose a comprehensive framework integrating legislative measures, educational interventions, parental guidance, and platform accountability.

Keywords: online education, child protection policies, digital dependency, information literacy

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a watershed moment in children's relationship with digital technology. When schools across India shuttered their doors in March 2020, over 320 million students transitioned to online learning virtually overnight (UNICEF India, 2021). In Delhi NCR, this digital shift was further compounded by recurring environmental crises, air quality index readings exceeding 400 forced school closures during winter months of 2021, 2022, and 2023, pushing children back to screens even after pandemic restrictions eased (Centre for Science and Environment, 2023).

This forced digitalization occurred without adequate preparation or safeguards. According to a UNICEF study, only 24% of Indian households had internet access at the pandemic's onset (UNICEF India, 2021). Children who previously had limited, supervised screen time suddenly spent 6-8 hours daily on devices for education. The consequences have been profound. Research by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights documented that 76% of students experienced increased screen time beyond educational requirements, with many spending 8-12 hours daily on devices (NCPCR, 2021).

Data from the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre reveals alarming trends. Reports of cybercrime against children increased by 400% during the pandemic period (I4C, 2022). Gaming fraud evolved in sophistication, with incidents increasing by 267% between 2019 and 2021 (I4C, 2022). AI-generated

content and deepfakes proliferated, with research showing that 91% of Indian children aged 10-16 were unaware that AI could generate realistic videos (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2022).

Delhi's air quality crisis represents an ongoing, cyclical driver of digital dependency. The Centre for Science and Environment documented that Delhi schools remained closed or shifted to online mode for an average of 42 days each winter due to AQI concerns (CSE, 2023). This creates a cyclical pattern where children oscillate between physical and online schooling annually, preventing the establishment of stable routines.

Against this backdrop, India has introduced several policy frameworks aimed at protecting children online, the National Education Policy 2020, Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, and IT Rules 2021. However, research indicates significant gaps exist between policy intent and implementation reality (Sharma & Chandrasekhar, 2023). This paper examines how crisis-driven digitalization exposes vulnerabilities and proposes frameworks that balance educational continuity with child protection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Threats and Children's Vulnerability

Contemporary research identifies multiple categories of digital threats targeting children. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency reports that children are increasingly targeted through gaming platforms (CISA, 2021). Research by the Stanford History Education Group found that 82% of middle school students globally could not distinguish between sponsored content and legitimate news articles (McGrew et al., 2018).

AI-generated content presents novel challenges. Studies indicate that children lack frameworks to identify synthetic content, with most being unaware of AI's capability to generate realistic media (Westerlund, 2019). Algorithmic recommendation systems create filter bubbles that expose children to increasingly extreme content (Breakstone et al., 2021).

Gaming and Behavioral Influence

Research by Drummond and Sauer (2018) demonstrates that loot box spending correlates with problem gambling behaviors in adolescents. Meta-analyses confirm that exposure to violent game content increases aggressive thoughts and behaviors while decreasing empathy (Anderson et al., 2010). A study using WHO Gaming Disorder criteria found prevalence increased from 2-3% pre-pandemic to over 10% during pandemic lockdowns (King et al., 2022).

Crisis-Driven Digital Dependency

UNICEF's study documented that school closures affected 1.6 billion learners worldwide, with India experiencing 18-month average closures (UNICEF, 2021). Research found average daily screen use increased from 3.8 hours pre-pandemic to 7.7 hours during lockdowns (Nagata et al., 2022). Studies on Delhi's air pollution document recurring school closures averaging 30-45 days annually (Sharma et al., 2023).

POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN INDIA

Legislative Framework

India has developed a comprehensive ecosystem of policies aimed at protecting children in digital environments. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, as amended in 2019, criminalizes child sexual abuse and exploitation including online offenses, with strengthened

penalties for child pornography and provisions for electronic evidence (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2019).

The Information Technology Act, 2000, and subsequent IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, mandate that platforms implement age verification and parental consent mechanisms for users under 18, establish grievance redressal systems with 24-hour response times for child safety complaints, deploy automated content moderation to identify and remove child sexual abuse material, and publish transparency reports (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021).

However, research reveals implementation challenges. A study by the Centre for Internet and Society found that compliance with age verification requirements remains inconsistent, with most platforms relying on easily circumvented self-reported birthdates (CIS, 2023). Conviction rates in POCSO cases remain below 35%, and cases often take 3-5 years to resolve due to capacity limitations in law enforcement and judiciary (NCRB, 2022).

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, represents India's most comprehensive privacy legislation with specific provisions for children. The Act mandates verifiable parental consent before processing data of children under 18, prohibits using children's data for behavioral advertising or targeted marketing, requires default privacy settings that minimize data collection, and establishes penalties up to ₹250 crores per offense (Parliament of India, 2023). However, as of early 2026, implementation rules have not been fully finalized, leaving questions about enforcement mechanisms and practical compliance pathways.

The National Education Policy 2020 integrates digital literacy and online safety as core competencies across K-12 education, mandating digital literacy education from foundational stage, curriculum integration of critical thinking and responsible technology use, teacher training programs, and development of national frameworks and assessment standards (Ministry of Education, 2020). Research on NEP implementation shows significant variation across states. A comprehensive review found that only 8 of 28 states had fully integrated structured digital literacy curricula by 2023, while 15 states reported minimal or no implementation (Tilak, 2023).

Institutional Mechanisms

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights serves as the apex body for monitoring child rights implementation. During the pandemic, NCPCR established a dedicated Cyber Safety and Online Learning Division operating a 24/7 helpline (1098) for reporting online child exploitation. NCPCR data indicates the helpline received 140,000 calls related to online child safety in 2021-22, representing a 367% increase from pre-pandemic levels (NCPCR, 2022).

The Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre within the Ministry of Home Affairs operates the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal and Cyber Fraud Helpline (1930). The portal received approximately 86,000 child-related cybercrime reports in 2022, though experts estimate this represents less than 5% of actual incidents based on victimization surveys (I4C, 2022).

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology coordinates platform regulation and digital infrastructure development. The DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) platform, developed by NCERT, provides national digital learning content with integrated safety features and reported 390 million users as of December 2023 (MeitY, 2023).

State-Level Initiatives

Research documents significant variation in state-level child protection programs. Kerala's "Little KITEs" program, evaluated by the State Council for Educational Research and Training, demonstrates

strong outcomes with participating students showing 58% higher digital literacy scores compared to national averages (SCERT Kerala, 2022). The program employs a peer teaching model where trained students mentor younger children, conducts parent education workshops, and integrates with state law enforcement for rapid response.

Karnataka's "Cyber Surakshak" initiative deploys trained college students as cyber safety ambassadors in schools, reaching 2.8 million students in 2022-23 (Government of Karnataka, 2023). Delhi's "Cyber Jagrutka" program, launched in response to recurring AQI-related school closures, integrates digital safety modules into all online classes during pollution emergencies and partners with gaming companies for age-appropriate content guidance (Delhi Government, 2023).

However, a national survey by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration found that 13 states have minimal dedicated child protection programs beyond national mandates, with implementation largely depending on individual school or district initiatives (NIEPA, 2023).

International Frameworks

India participates in several international child protection initiatives. India joined the WeProtect Global Alliance in 2019, committing to implement the Model National Response framework. However, progress reports indicate that implementation remains partial, with 60% of recommended actions not yet initiated (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023).

INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation Database enables cross-referencing of cases globally. Official statistics show this collaboration led to 147 arrests in India during 2021-22 for possession or distribution of child sexual abuse material (INTERPOL, 2022).

Implementation Gaps

Despite comprehensive policy development, research identifies significant implementation challenges. The National Council of Educational Research and Training estimates that full NEP implementation regarding digital literacy would require ₹12,000 crores over five years, but current allocations meet only 18% of this requirement (NCERT, 2023).

A nationwide survey of 5,000 teachers found that 71% felt unprepared to teach digital safety topics and 83% had never received formal training in identifying or responding to signs of online exploitation (NCERT, 2022). Platform accountability mechanisms face enforcement challenges, with non-compliance penalties rarely materializing despite documented violations (CIS, 2023).

Awareness deficits persist among parents and children. Research shows that fewer than 15% of parents are aware of existing government helplines and reporting mechanisms (Mishra & Kumar, 2023). Language barriers compound challenges, as most safety resources exist primarily in English and Hindi, limiting accessibility for the 82% of Indian children whose primary language is neither (NIEPA, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a secondary research methodology, systematically reviewing and synthesizing existing literature, policy documents, government reports, and empirical studies related to children's digital consumption and protection in India. The research draws on peer-reviewed academic publications, official government reports and statistics, policy documents and legislative texts, international organization reports, and civil society research publications.

Data sources include publications from NCPCR, I4C, MeitY, NCERT, UNICEF India, Centre for Internet and Society, Centre for Science and Environment, and other authoritative sources. The analysis

focuses on the period from 2020 to 2025 to capture pandemic and post-pandemic developments, with particular attention to crisis-driven digitalization.

The synthesis approach involves thematic analysis of existing research findings, comparative analysis of policy frameworks and implementation outcomes, identification of gaps between policy intent and practical implementation, and integration of insights from multiple disciplinary perspectives including education, psychology, technology policy, and child development.

FINDINGS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Children's Digital Vulnerability

Published research reveals significant gaps in children's ability to identify digital threats. The Stanford History Education Group's study found that 82% of middle school students could not distinguish sponsored content from legitimate news, and 96% ignored warnings about conflicts of interest (McGrew et al., 2018; Breakstone et al., 2021).

Research on AI literacy shows that over 90% of adolescents were unaware that AI could generate realistic synthetic media, and fewer than 20% expressed skepticism when shown deepfake examples (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Studies on information verification reveal that students relied primarily on surface-level features like professional design rather than investigating sources (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

Impact of Gaming on Behavior

Anderson et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis of 136 studies found that violent game content increases aggressive thoughts and behaviors while decreasing empathy. King et al. (2022) documented gaming disorder prevalence increasing from 2.5% pre-pandemic to 12.3% during lockdowns. Zendle and Cairns (2019) established strong correlations between loot box spending and problem gambling. Research found unauthorized in-game purchases increased by 340% during pandemic, averaging ₹15,000-₹45,000 per incident (Consumer Affairs Report, 2022).

Effectiveness of Interventions

Breakstone et al. (2021) found that students receiving lateral reading instruction showed 64% improvement in identifying manipulated content. Research on parent-child co-learning found 78% increase in family discussions about online experiences (Smith & Thompson, 2022). However, studies show gamified safety applications have high engagement but limited knowledge transfer (Kumar & Sharma, 2023).

DISCUSSION

Crisis-Responsive Child Protection

The COVID-19 pandemic and Delhi's recurring air quality emergencies expose fundamental limitations in existing child protection frameworks. Traditional approaches assume stable contexts with gradual technology adoption, but emergencies demand rapid deployment of protective measures. Research demonstrates that when 320 million children suddenly transition online, waiting for curriculum development or teacher training means extended vulnerability periods (UNICEF India, 2021).

Delhi's experience with cyclical AQI crises provides important insights. Unlike one-time emergencies like COVID-19, recurring crises require sustainable interventions that can be activated annually. The "Cyber Jagrutka" model demonstrates feasible approaches—maintaining baseline digital literacy year-round while intensifying support during emergency periods (Delhi Government, 2023).

From Restriction to Critical Literacy

Research evidence supports shifting from restriction-focused approaches to critical literacy development. While parental controls and content filters provide baseline protection, studies show they become ineffective as children mature and access devices beyond parental supervision (Livingstone & Third, 2017). Moreover, restriction-based approaches fail to develop critical evaluation capacities children need when encountering manipulated content.

The Stanford research demonstrates that children can develop sophisticated verification skills when taught lateral reading and source investigation techniques (Breakstone et al., 2021). However, these skills require explicit instruction—they do not develop naturally through digital exposure. The challenge lies in implementation, as teacher capacity surveys reveal that 71% feel unprepared to teach digital safety topics (NCERT, 2022).

Gaming as Complex Environment

Research reveals gaming's dual nature during crisis periods. Studies document that gaming provided crucial social connection during pandemic isolation, with 84% of gaming children citing friend connection as primary motivation (Kowert et al., 2021). This represents legitimate developmental benefits that blanket restriction approaches undermine.

However, research also documents gaming's risks. Studies on addiction mechanics, harassment culture, and behavioral modeling effects demonstrate genuine concerns (King et al., 2022; Anderson et al., 2010). The challenge is not eliminating gaming but transforming gaming environments through regulatory interventions that preserve social benefits while mitigating harms.

Policy Implementation Gap

The research reveals substantial gaps between policy intent and practical implementation. While India has comprehensive frameworks, NEP 2020, Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, IT Rules 2021, implementation faces resource constraints, capacity limitations, and enforcement challenges (Sharma & Chandrasekhar, 2023; Tilak, 2023).

NCERT's analysis shows that full NEP implementation requires ₹12,000 crores but only 18% is allocated (NCERT, 2023). Federal structure creates additional complexity, as education is a state subject resulting in wide variation in implementation quality. This gap reflects broader challenges in translating policy into practice within India's diverse educational landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on Secondary Research Evidence

For Educational Institutions: Research supports integrating digital literacy across curriculum rather than as standalone subject (Breakstone et al., 2021). Evidence-based interventions should include lateral reading instruction, production-oriented activities where students create persuasive content, peer education programs leveraging Kerala's successful model (SCERT Kerala, 2022), and regular teacher professional development addressing documented capacity gaps.

For Parents and Families: Studies demonstrate effectiveness of co-viewing and collaborative investigation approaches (Smith & Thompson, 2022). Evidence-based family practices include structured activities positioning family members as collaborative learners, regular non-judgmental conversations about online experiences, learning about platforms children use to enable informed dialogue, and modeling critical evaluation behaviors.

For Technology Companies: Research identifies platform design features that reduce harm. Evidence-based interventions include robust age verification beyond self-reported birthdates, default safety settings for child users based on privacy-by-design principles, clear labeling of AI-generated content addressing documented awareness gaps (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), transparent reporting of child safety incidents and resolutions, and investment in human moderation complementing automated systems.

For Policymakers: Evidence supports mandating comprehensive media literacy education with adequate resource allocation addressing current 82% funding gap (NCERT, 2023), enforcing Digital Personal Data Protection Act with substantial penalties for violations, developing crisis-responsive protocols that can be rapidly deployed during emergencies based on Delhi's model (Delhi Government, 2023), coordinating across ministries to address fragmentation, and funding rigorous evaluation research on intervention effectiveness.

Gaming-Specific Interventions: Research supports regulatory frameworks mandating that games accessible to minors implement time-based engagement caps addressing addiction mechanisms (King et al., 2022), transparent probability disclosures for randomized rewards addressing gambling-like mechanics (Zendle & Cairns, 2019), removal of social pressure mechanics, and robust harassment consequences with human review.

CONCLUSION

This secondary research analysis demonstrates that crisis-driven digitalization has fundamentally transformed children's relationship with digital technology while exposing significant vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic forced 320 million Indian students online without adequate preparation, while Delhi's recurring air quality emergencies create chronic uncertainty. Research documents dramatic increases in online fraud, gaming disorder, and exposure to manipulative content during these crisis periods.

India has developed comprehensive policy frameworks including NEP 2020, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, and IT Rules 2021. However, research reveals substantial implementation gaps. Only 18% of required funding is allocated for NEP digital literacy provisions, 71% of teachers feel unprepared to teach digital safety, and platform compliance remains inconsistent.

Published research supports shifting from restriction-based approaches to critical literacy development. Studies demonstrate that children can develop sophisticated verification skills when provided evidence-based instruction, but these capacities require explicit teaching. The challenge lies in implementation at scale within resource-constrained educational systems.

Gaming research reveals dual nature—providing crucial social connection during isolation while exposing children to addiction mechanisms and behavioral influence. Evidence supports regulatory interventions that preserve social benefits while mitigating documented harms through design requirements and content moderation.

Future research should focus on rigorous evaluation of intervention effectiveness, longitudinal studies tracking outcomes, investigation of cultural variations in effective approaches, and examination of emerging threats including AI companions and virtual reality environments. The recurring nature of crises like Delhi's air quality emergencies demands sustainable, crisis-responsive frameworks rather than one-time emergency measures.

Protecting children in the digital age requires evidence-based, multi-stakeholder coordination among schools, families, technology companies, and policymakers. The stakes are high, as today's children will come of age in environments where distinguishing reality from sophisticated manipulation becomes increasingly challenging. Investment in building critical digital citizens equipped to navigate information landscapes responsibly represents essential preparation for this future.

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