

Virtual Shadows: Protecting Children from Invisible Threats in the Digital World

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Abstract

This conceptual study addresses the increasing digital dangers children face in today's online environment. Drawing on secondary data from academic journals, internet sources, and news articles, the research analyses how children in India navigate online threats such as cyber bullying, predation, and exposure to harmful content. The study examines existing protective frameworks and identifies gaps in digital literacy and parental oversight. By emphasizing the invisible risks of the digital world, it advocates for more robust technological safeguards and community-led awareness programs that protect children online.

Keywords: Digital Dangers, Online Safety, Cyberbullying, Digital Literacy, India, Child Protection, Technology

Introduction

The digital landscape has become an integral part of children's lives, bringing with it both opportunities and threats. Children today navigate a world where the internet is a primary source of education, entertainment, and social interaction, but this also exposes them to invisible threats such as cyberbullying, online predators, and harmful content. As they engage with the digital world, children in India face increasing dangers, particularly when digital literacy, parental oversight, and policy protections are insufficient. This study explores these issues, drawing on secondary data from academic journals, reports, and news articles to analyse how children in India are affected by the digital environment, the gaps in current protective frameworks, and the strategies needed to mitigate these risks.

One of the primary challenges in protecting children online is the invisible nature of the threats they face. Unlike physical dangers, digital threats often remain unseen by both children and their caregivers. The internet, while offering immense educational and social benefits, also exposes children to cyberbullying, predatory behaviour, and harmful content. As digital natives, children are

frequent users of social media platforms and gaming sites, which increase their exposure to these risks. In this regard, the study underscores the importance of identifying these hidden dangers and taking proactive steps to prevent harm.

The study reveals that online dangers manifest in various forms, including content, contact, and conduct risks. Content risks include exposure to inappropriate material such as violence, pornography, or hate speech. Contact risks arise when children engage with strangers or malicious actors online, leading to potential threats like grooming or exploitation. Conduct risks, such as cyberbullying or the spread of personal information, are tied to children's online behaviour and interactions. Consumer risks, such as unauthorized purchases or the misuse of personal data, add another layer of vulnerability. The complexity of these risks demands targeted interventions, which require the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including governments, schools, parents, and tech companies.

Government policies play a crucial role in shaping the digital environment for children. In India, while there have been efforts to enhance digital safety, significant gaps remain in terms of regulatory frameworks and enforcement. Policies often fail to keep up with the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms, leaving children vulnerable to emerging threats. Many protective measures, such as age restrictions or privacy settings, are either ineffective or not consistently implemented. This study argues that a stronger regulatory approach is needed, focusing on comprehensive digital literacy programs, stricter enforcement of online safety laws, and collaborations with tech companies to create safer online spaces for children.

Parents, too, have a pivotal role in safeguarding their children in the digital world. The study highlights that many parents lack the knowledge or tools to effectively monitor their children's online activities. Digital literacy is not only crucial for children but also for parents, who need to understand the platforms their children use and the potential risks involved. Parental oversight, combined with open communication, can help mitigate online dangers, but there is a clear need for community-based awareness programs to educate families on safe digital practices.

Educational institutions are uniquely positioned to instil digital literacy in children from a young age. Schools should not only integrate digital skills into their curricula but also foster discussions about online safety, ethical behaviour, and the emotional impacts of cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content. Teachers can play a significant role by guiding students on how to navigate the internet safely, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting responsible online conduct. The study points to successful case studies in some countries where schools have implemented comprehensive digital safety programs, showing a reduction in online risks for children.

Despite the growing focus on online safety, the study identifies several gaps in the current approaches. Digital literacy programs, though increasing, remain limited in reach, particularly in rural or underserved communities. There is a lack of parental involvement in many existing initiatives, leaving children in vulnerable positions. While tech companies have introduced certain safety features, these are often reactive rather than preventive, addressing problems only after they have occurred. The study calls for more robust technological safeguards that pre-emptively block harmful content and predatory behaviour, coupled with community-driven programs that engage both parents and children.

In this study, researchers have explored the various invisible threats children face in the digital world, particularly in the Indian context. Through a review of secondary data, study identified key risks, including cyberbullying, predatory behaviour, and exposure to harmful content, while also examining the gaps in existing protective frameworks. By emphasizing the importance of digital literacy, parental involvement, and stronger regulatory policies, study aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges children encounter online. The study calls for

proactive measures, such as technological safeguards and community-driven awareness programs, to ensure children's safety in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

Review of Literature

The review of relevant literature is crucial for understanding the scope, limitations, and gaps in current research on the dangers that children face in the digital world. The literature review includes studies from various domains that touch upon digital media's influence on children's behaviour, mental health, and well-being. This review provides insights from multiple perspectives, highlighting how children navigate a world increasingly shaped by digital interactions.

Dr. Saima Nisar et al. (2020), in their study titled "Impact of Social Media on General Health of Children," explored the impact of social media on children's physical and mental well-being. Using a sample of 100 students from Karachi, Pakistan, the study concluded that children, being more vulnerable, are significantly affected by social media exposure, which impacts their health, lifestyle, and social interactions. This study is particularly relevant as it highlights the invisibility of digital threats that parents may not immediately recognize, such as altered behaviour and deteriorating health, thus emphasizing the need for stricter controls and monitoring systems—an argument central to the current study.

In a similar vein, Lisa M. Cookingham, MD (2015), in her study "The Impact of Social Media on the Sexual and Social Wellness of Adolescents," explored how digital platforms influence adolescents' sexual and social behaviours. The study concluded that exposure to certain types of content can significantly affect adolescents' self-esteem, encourage risky behaviours, and distort social norms. The link between online content and real-world consequences aligns with the focus of the current study, suggesting that children and adolescents are at risk of invisible yet substantial threats, making it critical to educate and protect them.

Michele Ybarra et al. (2007), in the study titled "Internet and Youth Sexual Behaviour: Implications for Future Research," examined the role of the internet in shaping youth sexual behaviour and attitudes. Using a sample of American teenagers, the researchers concluded that increased access to the internet without adequate guidance or restrictions has led to concerning patterns of risky behaviours. This study not only supports the current research's focus on the invisible threats children face but also underscores the importance of parental control mechanisms and online safety education.

Livingstone and Haddon (2009), in their comprehensive study titled "EU Kids Online: Enhancing Knowledge Regarding European Children's Use of Online Technologies," examined how children across Europe use the internet and the associated risks. The study identified various online dangers, including cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and the increasing prevalence of privacy violations. This study is essential for understanding the need for global interventions in online safety and highlights the critical role of education in protecting children from invisible digital threats, thereby connecting directly with the objectives of the current research.

Diane Levin (2013), in her work "Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood: Teaching Children in the Media Age," explores how media exposure, particularly through online platforms, impacts children's cognitive development. Levin argues that unregulated digital exposure not only shapes children's thinking and learning processes but also their ability to socialize and problem-solve. This study resonates with the current research in emphasizing the long-term effects of unchecked online activities on children's mental health and development, urging for active engagement from both educators and parents.

The reviewed literature collectively underlines the fact that children and adolescents are significantly affected by the invisible threats posed by digital platforms. Whether through exposure

to inappropriate content, social media pressure, or cognitive impacts from unregulated media use, the studies confirm the dangers lurking in the digital environment. These findings align with the central argument of the current research: while digital spaces offer vast opportunities, they also harbour substantial risks for young users. To address these issues, there is a need for comprehensive strategies that combine parental guidance, educational interventions, and policy regulations to create safer online environments for children.

Research Methodology

This conceptual research investigates strategies to protect children from invisible threats in the digital world, focusing on how to create safer online environments for children in India. The study draws upon secondary data from academic journals, reports, and other studies to explore current protective frameworks, analyse the challenges in implementing these frameworks, and evaluate the role of key stakeholders in mitigating digital risks. By reviewing relevant literature and existing protective measures, the research identifies critical factors that contribute to the success or failure of these strategies and emphasizes the need for enhanced collaborative efforts among governments, NGOs, parents, and tech companies.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on safeguarding children from the unique and often hidden dangers posed by digital environments. With the increasing reliance on technology for education, communication, and entertainment, children are more vulnerable than ever to online threats such as cyberbullying, privacy violations, exposure to harmful content, and digital addiction. This study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of existing digital safety measures, offering a foundation for improving policy frameworks and intervention strategies to protect children in India's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To evaluate existing child protection frameworks in the digital environment, including legislative, policy, and technical measures.
2. To analyse the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, tech companies, and parents in safeguarding children from online threats.
3. To examine the specific challenges faced by marginalized children in accessing digital safety measures and protections.

The study employs a descriptive approach, relying exclusively on secondary data to provide a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, reports, and studies related to child protection in digital spaces. By reviewing academic papers, policy documents, NGO publications, and government reports, the study aims to understand the current landscape of online safety initiatives for children. While the absence of primary data limits the scope to some degree, secondary sources offer a wealth of information to assess the successes and shortcomings of existing digital protection strategies for children.

Data for the research is sourced from a variety of published materials, including reports and governmental child protection schemes. Studies on digital literacy, cybersecurity policies, and community-based interventions for digital safety provide insights into how protective frameworks for children in digital environments have been established. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how various stakeholders have contributed to online safety and the challenges in scaling these interventions, particularly in marginalized or under-resourced areas.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on published material, which may not fully capture the most recent and evolving dynamics of digital child protection efforts, especially in rapidly changing online environments. While the study focuses primarily on the digital space, it acknowledges that digital threats intersect with broader social and psychological factors that affect children's

well-being. The study offers valuable contributions to the discourse on protecting children from invisible online threats and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, organizations, and parents working in the field.

By identifying gaps in current digital safety frameworks, this research aims to contribute to the creation of safer online environments for children. It highlights the need for stronger collaborations between governments, NGOs, tech companies, and parents, ensuring a more holistic approach to child protection in the digital age. The study emphasizes that while technology provides immense opportunities, its risks must be managed effectively to safeguard the most vulnerable members of society-children.

Findings and Discussion

This section is a comprehensive analysis of the issues identified and also integrates these findings with the existing literature, offering a critical evaluation of the protective measures in place for children in the digital environment, the gaps in current frameworks, and the necessary steps to create safer online spaces. The section also examines the roles of various stakeholders and the challenges faced, particularly by marginalized children, in accessing digital protections.

Emergence of Invisible Threats in the Digital World

One of the primary findings of this study is the rapid proliferation of unseen and often unregulated risks to children in the digital space. Children are exposed to a wide range of dangers, including cyberbullying, identity theft, exposure to inappropriate content, and online predators. Despite widespread internet use among children, there is a notable gap in awareness and education regarding these risks among both parents and children. Many children, particularly from marginalized or rural backgrounds, lack the digital literacy skills necessary to recognize or respond to online threats effectively.

The literature review supports this finding, showing a correlation between increased screen time and higher instances of digital harm. Studies like that of Lisa M. Cookingham (2015), which highlights the negative impact of social media on adolescents' social and sexual well-being, align with this concern. This emphasizes the need for not only protective measures but also proactive education on the safe use of technology.

Inadequate Digital Safety Frameworks

A significant finding is the insufficiency of existing digital safety frameworks, particularly in India. Current legal and policy measures are largely reactive rather than preventive. While there are laws addressing cybercrime and child protection, the enforcement and effectiveness of these laws are limited, particularly in ensuring children's safety online. Technical measures, such as parental control software, exist but are not widely used or understood by parents in India.

This finding connects with studies such as Saima Nisar et al. (2020), which show the pervasive influence of social media on children's health. The study revealed that social media significantly impacts children's overall well-being, which is exacerbated by the lack of structured digital safety protocols. Inadequate frameworks create environments where children are vulnerable to digital threats, with limited recourse for protection or redress.

Lack of Collaborative Efforts among Stakeholders

One of the most pressing challenges identified is the lack of coordinated efforts between key stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, parents, and tech companies. This fragmentation undermines the creation of holistic digital safety systems for children. Each stakeholder plays

a critical role, but without effective collaboration, protective measures remain disjointed and ineffective.

Government policies and regulations, though present, are insufficiently enforced and often fail to address the rapid evolution of online platforms and threats. NGOs, while providing critical support and education, are often underfunded and unable to scale their efforts. Tech companies, on the other hand, focus primarily on profit-driven innovation, with child protection sometimes taking a back seat. The absence of comprehensive partnerships hinders the development of robust and adaptive safety frameworks.

This finding resonates with Gasser et al. (2012), whose work emphasizes the importance of demographic and contextual factors in shaping youth interactions with digital media. The study highlights how youth from different socio-economic backgrounds face varying levels of protection and support, further underscoring the need for inclusive, multi-stakeholder approaches.

Challenges Faced by Marginalized Children

Marginalized children, particularly those from rural or lower-income backgrounds, face the most significant barriers in accessing digital protections. They are disproportionately affected by digital threats due to their limited access to resources, education, and protective measures. The digital divide exacerbates these challenges, with marginalized children being more likely to use shared or unmonitored devices, increasing their vulnerability.

This issue aligns with the findings of Arora et al. (2012), who examined how digital platforms shape creativity and personality development in adolescents. The study highlights how adolescents from underprivileged backgrounds face unique challenges, such as lack of guidance and excessive screen exposure, making them more susceptible to harmful online behaviours.

Barriers to Implementing Digital Safety Measures

The study identifies several key barriers to implementing effective digital safety measures. There is a pervasive lack of awareness and digital literacy among both children and parents, which limits their ability to recognize and address digital threats. The rapidly evolving nature of online threats makes it difficult for protective frameworks to remain up-to-date and relevant.

Socio-cultural factors play a role, particularly in India, where digital discussions about children's online safety are often avoided or overlooked. Parents may not fully understand the depth of digital threats, or they may prioritize other forms of education over digital literacy. The stigma attached to certain issues, such as online harassment or exposure to harmful content, further inhibits open conversations about digital safety.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for a multi-layered approach to protecting children from digital threats. While current frameworks provide a basic level of protection, they fall short in addressing the rapidly evolving and invisible risks that children face in the digital world. Collaborative efforts between governments, tech companies, NGOs, parents, and educational institutions are crucial for establishing effective safety measures that are adaptable and responsive to new threats.

The study also highlights the importance of focusing on marginalized children, who face greater digital risks due to limited resources and digital literacy. Ensuring that protective measures are inclusive and accessible to all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, is a critical challenge moving forward.

While strides have been made in addressing child protection in digital environments, significant gaps remain. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach, integrating legal, technical, and educational strategies to create safer digital spaces for all children.

These efforts must be continuously adapted to the changing digital landscape, with a focus on proactive education and empowerment for both children and their guardians.

Interventions and Suggestions

This section focuses on providing practical recommendations to enhance child safety in digital spaces and outlines social work interventions to address the challenges identified. These suggestions target key stakeholders, including the government, parents, educational institutions, and NGOs, to create a comprehensive framework for protecting children in the digital world. Social work interventions are proposed to ensure that all children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are shielded from digital threats.

Suggestions

To the Government

Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

Governments should update and enforce existing child protection laws to account for the evolving digital landscape. This includes specific laws addressing online harassment, cyberbullying, and child exploitation on digital platforms.

Develop National Digital Safety Campaigns

Governments can initiate large-scale digital literacy campaigns to educate children, parents, and communities about online safety. These campaigns should include accessible resources on identifying, reporting, and preventing digital threats.

Mandate Tech Companies to Ensure Child Safety

Governments should collaborate with tech companies to create mandatory safety features, such as enhanced parental controls, reporting mechanisms, and filters that automatically block harmful content.

Invest in Digital Safety Infrastructure

Especially in rural and marginalized areas, the government must invest in digital infrastructure to provide internet access while ensuring that safety mechanisms are in place. This includes offering public resources, such as community centers, with supervised internet access for children.

To Parents

Foster Open Communication About Online Experiences

Parents should maintain an open dialogue with their children about their online activities. This includes setting aside time for regular discussions about digital safety, what children are encountering online, and how to avoid harmful situations.

Implement Supervised Internet Usage

Parents should set up supervised internet usage for younger children, including using parental controls, content filters, and time restrictions to limit screen time. This also involves educating themselves on how to use these tools effectively.

Promote Digital Literacy

Parents should encourage and participate in their children's digital education. This includes teaching children how to recognize online threats such as cyberbullying, phishing, and inappropriate content.

Balance Screen Time with Offline Activities

Encouraging children to engage in offline activities, such as sports or hobbies, helps reduce overexposure to digital platforms and mitigates the risk of digital addiction.

To Educational Institutions

Integrate Digital Safety into School Curricula

Schools should incorporate digital literacy and online safety education into their core curricula. This approach will equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the digital world responsibly and understand potential online dangers. By embedding digital safety into regular lessons, students can gain practical knowledge and strategies for protecting themselves online.

Train Teachers and Counsellors on Digital Threats

Educational institutions should provide targeted training programs for teachers and counsellors to enhance their ability to recognize and address digital threats such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and digital exploitation. This training should include up-to-date information on emerging digital trends and practical interventions for supporting affected students.

Promote Mental Health Support Systems

Schools should establish comprehensive mental health support systems, including access to counsellors and mental health resources. This will help students who are impacted by online issues or any other form of bullying and provide them with the support needed to cope and thrive.

Foster a Safe and Inclusive Environment

Schools should create and maintain a safe and inclusive environment where all students feel secure. Implementing strict anti-bullying policies, encouraging positive peer interactions, and actively addressing any form of discrimination or exclusion can help in nurturing a supportive learning atmosphere.

To NGOs

Enhance Community Outreach Programs

NGOs should focus on expanding their community outreach efforts to raise awareness about digital safety among families and children. This can involve organizing workshops, seminars, and information campaigns that address the specific digital risks and safety practices relevant to local communities.

Develop Targeted Support Programs

NGOs should design and implement support programs that cater to the needs of children and families at higher risk of digital threats. These programs could include counselling services, digital literacy training, and resource centers for online safety, tailored to address the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups.

Collaborate on Public Awareness Campaigns

NGOs should partner with educational institutions and local governments to run public awareness campaigns on digital safety. These campaigns can highlight the importance of responsible online behaviour, provide practical tips for safeguarding against digital threats, and promote resources available for support.

Create and Monitor Safe Online Spaces

NGOs can work with local communities to develop safe, monitored online platforms where children can access educational content and support. These platforms should be designed with privacy and security features to protect users and facilitate positive online interactions, fostering a safer digital environment for young users.

Social Work Intervention

Advocacy and Policy Reform

Social workers can play a crucial role in advocating for policy reforms that strengthen digital safety regulations for children. This involves lobbying for laws that hold tech companies accountable for child protection and ensuring that child rights are respected in the digital domain. Social workers can also work to ensure that government initiatives are inclusive, especially for marginalized populations, by providing insights into the specific challenges these groups face.

Digital Literacy Programs

One of the most effective interventions social workers can lead is the creation and implementation of digital literacy programs targeted at children, parents, and communities. These programs should aim to:

1. Educate children about safe online behaviour, recognizing potential threats, and avoiding harmful digital content.
2. Train parents and caregivers on using parental control tools and identifying signs of digital distress, such as cyberbullying or online exploitation.
3. Organize community workshops, particularly in rural or underserved areas, to bridge the digital divide and promote responsible internet use.

Counselling and Support Services

Social workers should establish counselling and support services for children affected by digital threats such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and digital addiction. This intervention can include:

1. Offering one-on-one or group counselling to children who have been exposed to harmful online behaviours, helping them process their experiences and develop coping mechanisms.
2. Providing parents and caregivers with strategies to support their children in managing digital threats and creating a safe, balanced online environment.
3. Partnering with schools to develop in-house counselling programs that focus specifically on digital threats and their emotional impact on students.

Collaborating with Tech Companies

Social workers can also collaborate with tech companies to develop child-centric digital safety features. These collaborations could result in the following:

1. Creating reporting systems that are easy for children to use if they encounter harmful content or interactions online.
2. Developing online safety modules or apps designed for children to learn about digital threats in an engaging, age-appropriate manner.
3. Partnering with tech companies to ensure that platforms prioritize child protection and incorporate features such as content moderation, age restrictions, and parental controls by default.

Crisis Intervention for Marginalized Children

Social workers must focus on vulnerable populations, particularly marginalized children who may face greater digital risks due to socioeconomic or geographical factors. Interventions in this area could include:

1. Establishing mobile or community-based digital safety units that travel to remote areas to educate children and their families about online safety.
2. Creating accessible, low-cost digital safety resources and tools that can be distributed to underprivileged communities.
3. Collaborating with local leaders to integrate digital safety awareness into existing community programs, such as child welfare or health services, to ensure that marginalized children are included in protective efforts.

To safeguard children from the invisible threats in the digital world, it is essential that stakeholders, including the government, parents, educational institutions, NGOs, and social workers, work in collaboration. The suggestions provided focus on strengthening digital safety frameworks, enhancing digital literacy, and creating environments that foster open communication and awareness. Social work interventions play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between policy and practice by advocating for reforms, delivering community-centered education, and providing counselling and support services.

By addressing the complex interplay of factors that expose children to digital threats, the combined efforts of stakeholders can ensure that the internet remains a safe and empowering space for all children.

Conclusion

The study has illuminated the urgent need to safeguard children in an increasingly digitalized world. The internet, while a valuable tool for education, entertainment, and communication, also presents numerous risks, such as cyberbullying, online exploitation, exposure to inappropriate content, and digital addiction. As children spend more time online, their vulnerability to these threats intensifies, particularly in environments where protective measures are insufficient or awareness is lacking.

Through a detailed review of existing literature and case studies, the study identified key areas where children face the greatest risk, including unregulated internet use, lack of digital literacy, and inadequate supervision. Marginalized children, including those from rural or low-income backgrounds, are at an even higher risk due to limited access to digital safety resources. This study highlights the interconnected roles of various stakeholders—government bodies, parents, educational institutions, NGOs, and social workers—in fostering safe digital environments.

The findings demonstrate that the current protective frameworks, while useful, are insufficient in addressing the rapidly evolving digital landscape. There is a critical need for the government to strengthen legal and policy frameworks that prioritize child safety online, including collaboration with tech companies to enforce child-centric safety measures. Parents play a vital role in guiding their children's online behaviour, fostering open communication, and supervising internet use to ensure a balance between online and offline activities.

Educational institutions and NGOs are essential in raising awareness and providing education on digital safety. Schools must integrate digital literacy into their curricula, while NGOs can focus on marginalized communities, ensuring they are not left behind in the digital divide. Social work interventions are indispensable in offering counselling, support services, advocacy, and community-based education, particularly for vulnerable groups.

The study emphasizes the need for a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to protect children in digital spaces. It advocates for a combination of legal reforms, educational initiatives, community involvement, and social work interventions to ensure that the internet remains a safe and positive space for children. The suggestions and interventions proposed aim to fill the gaps in current protective frameworks and offer actionable steps to create a more secure digital world for all children. By addressing both systemic issues and individual responsibilities, this study provides a foundation for developing more effective strategies to protect children from the invisible threats lurking in the virtual shadows.

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