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An Instagram Of One's Own: Young Indian Women's Use of Mobile Technologies for Skilling and Work

Dhavan, N., Oreglia, E. & Israni, A., 2024, *Mobile Communication and Women's Agency: Under the Radar* . Pei, X., Malhotra, P. & Ling, R. (eds.). Routledge

Abstract:

This chapter explores how young, urban, working-class Indian women use social media to imagine and pursue their work aspirations, and how their socioeconomic status and intersectional identities may limit the potential futures that the internet opened up to their imaginations. We focus on women who are at the margins of urban life and society and typically the first in their families to engage in more formal work and in new forms of small-scale entrepreneurship enabled by the internet. We employ a feminist lens to study self-expression and digital engagement to show that these women's unprecedented access to the internet, as mediated by social media on mobile phones and furthered by the pandemic, pushed them to envision a myriad of creative, imagined futures. However, their own narratives of restrictions and strategies in using these technologies in existing social contexts shed light on the limits of the seemingly infinite power of the internet.

Keywords: digital literacy; gender; India; Instagram; smartphones; social media

Introduction

If you think of an automobile shop, the mechanics and crew on the floor . . . [are the ones whose] training is vocational; the service advisor, who speaks to the client to understand the issue and direct problems, is usually polytechnic-trained and the general manager of the auto shop or the enterprise is someone who holds a Bachelor's of Technology Degree.¹

Vidya,² a third-year polytechnic student from Lucknow studying automotive mechanics, had a very clear idea of where polytechnic graduates stood in an enterprise's hierarchy of skills and status. She came from a solid working-class background³: her father was a technician for Godrej, a steel and industry conglomerate, and her mother worked in a saree shop before stopping because of poor health. Her brother was studying for a Bachelor of Technology (BTech), while her sister was also a polytechnic student, but in tractor mechanics. Vidya had tried different kinds of education and decided to avoid the grueling, multi-year process of trying for a government job,⁴ hoping instead to get into private industry.

A smartphone had been key in pursuing Vidya's education and job aspirations. For her, as for many other young people in India regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, digital devices are increasingly a necessary tool to access career opportunities and training, and to perform their jobs. While there is research on how young people use smartphones for education and entertainment ([Arora, 2012](#); [Venkatraman, 2017](#)), there has not been much focus on how they use them to imagine and create their future professional selves. In this chapter, we ask: How are young women in urban north India using smartphones to explore their sense of self and aspirations, particularly in terms of work? The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted women's access to digital devices, and we explored this momentous change through extended qualitative research with women enrolled in polytechnics in urban Uttar Pradesh who primarily used smartphones to go online. We recruited women from modest backgrounds⁵ who were on the cusp of making important decisions about their first job, and here we focus on the role smartphones played

during this critical transition into the formal economy and on how women's identity and position in society permitted or restricted their ability to fulfill their aspirations ([Poonam, 2018](#)).

Gender, smartphones, and work

To understand young women's smartphone use, we draw on a feminist perspective of ICT use that argues that technology shapes and is shaped by gender dynamics ([Wajcman, 2010](#)). Rather than looking at whether these phones are beneficial or deter the path of these women, we aim to understand how they are used and adapted ([Kumar, 2013](#); [Srinivasan, 2018](#)) and how our research participants negotiated such use ([Oreglia & Srinivasan, 2016](#); [Rai, 2019](#); [Tenhunen, 2019](#); [Venkatraman, 2017](#)). A central concept in these works is agency, that is how women make choices and how technology enables and restricts these choices. In this chapter, we explore the reality and the limitations of women's agency both in their career choices and in their technology use. This is not to rehash the old debate of whether technology empowers or not, but rather to understand what new power configurations are created through and around technology. We also draw on the literature on the use of phones in the Global South which has shed light on how people modify technology to make it their own ([Kumar, 2013](#); [Srinivasan, 2018](#)). This literature has highlighted phenomena such as phones providing "meaningful mobility" ([Tacchi et al., 2012](#)) and a "necessary convergence" of media-related activities taking place through a single rather than multiple devices ([Wallis, 2013](#), p. 7). The increased availability and affordability of handsets in India has led to increased smartphone use and brought technology into the hands of users at the margins; they may use intermediaries for some technical and logistical functions but their autonomous use is extensive, sophisticated, and driven by individual and local imaginations and needs ([Gupta et al., 2022](#); [Oreglia & Ling, 2018](#)).

Lastly, we note that in young adulthood, the exploration of freedoms is itself an expression of the self and yet young people, like our respondents, often remain dependent on their families in this period. Equally, both technology for youth and research on young people's

digital engagement across the globe are itself typically designed and interpreted by adults ([Buckingham & Willett, 2013](#); [Herring, 2008](#)). Thus, this period of young adulthood and the associated power differential as well as the need to unpack localized practices in technology use make it even more important to examine how young people in the Global South are using, interpreting, and adapting digital technologies according to their own preferences in understanding their sense of self.

Methods

We worked with the Indian NGO Kriya to contact young people and then snowballed recruitment out to their acquaintances. Due to the pandemic, we carried out interviews through audio and video calls. Each of the eight respondents did at least one, but sometimes more, semi-structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed. We also carried out online observations ([boyd, 2014](#); [Highfield & Leaver, 2016](#)) by following the informants on Instagram and analyzing links and media they shared with the first author.⁶ Instagram content was then discussed in interviews to understand the significance of the moments they captured. We also drew from interviews with Kriya staff, who gave us their longer-term perspectives on changes in their community of young people. We subsequently carried out a thematic analysis to examine patterns arising from the narratives ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)). Themes and subthemes were iteratively developed, drawing on the method of constant comparison ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)).

Findings

For the young women in our study, their families' smartphones, not computers, were the portal with which to access an otherwise inaccessible internet ([Donner, 2015](#)). Consequently, they faced several obstacles, for example, technology designed for work and education is not typically "mobile-first," it is easier to use on devices with bigger screens that they did not possess, they

had limited access to Wi-Fi, and they usually had very limited daily data. These challenges became more serious as the pandemic began, with school and work shifting online. In this section, we discuss how young women were able to leverage technology to make the transition to formal work when their families and even schools could not provide them with the needed skills.

Speaking up: advocating for oneself at home and at work

Our research participants were relatively privileged in terms of education, as they made it into higher education which can be a challenge in India, especially for women ([Ghosh & Kundu, 2021](#)). The staff of Kriya reflected that parents and colleges were often not able to support young people in getting their first jobs. Parents were busy, not educated to their children's level, or had never applied for the kind of jobs to which their children aspired. Colleges did not have resources to support young people in developing their job-related skills. Kriya stepped into this void to provide training on basic but essential career skills that students could not access elsewhere, for example, how to describe themselves to a potential employer, make a CV, search and apply for jobs, etc. Particularly useful for young women, as noted by Girish, a senior Kriya representative, were lessons on how to negotiate and communicate to successfully build a career. For example, Parul was in her final semester of her BTech and hoped to be an engineer. She used to be so afraid at school that she would not speak to anyone, especially boys, and not even when addressed by a teacher. Through Kriya's training, she learned how to raise her hand, make eye contact, and speak up, so that *"Now I am able to talk to everyone, and even when I am walking on the road alone, I can handle it."*

For women, this inability to speak up is rooted in social hierarchies. For our young respondents, this played out extensively at home and work. At home, many found it difficult to ask permission for jobs and internships that families may not find acceptable. At work, they were often not listened to or taken seriously by colleagues and bosses. An internal Kriya review showed that this difficulty speaking up and being heard created deep, unresolved, and persistent

insecurity, anger, and distress. Drawing on his decade of experience, Girish shared that he and his staff had been surprised by how successful the simple act of engaging family decision-makers in discussions about young women's work had been. Explaining why the job or internship was important had created situations where fathers allowed their daughters to engage in such work, having previously been disinclined to do so.

The pandemic changes social attitudes toward young women owning smartphones

As Girish reflected on significant victories that young women made in negotiating with their families, he noted how he and his team have had to negotiate with parents and even *panchayats* (village councils) to provide phones to young women. Having and using a smartphone meant that women could harness the power of social media for small business ventures. Parents reported that they were concerned about cyberbullying and security, but some also added that “*girls will get spoiled*” and that phones given to them would create controversy in the village. The pandemic changed these attitudes significantly and, as parents came to realize the critical importance of their daughters' ability to use a smartphone, many young women finally got their own phones. Some, like Ridhima, were able to buy one themselves. Her father ran a small neighborhood shop and her mother was a homemaker; their financial situation had always been precarious, so they could not help her, but she was able to use her scholarship money for a smartphone.

Owning their own phone, rather than relying on borrowed devices, made a major difference in how our participants were able to engage with school and job searches. In some cases, faulty access became problematic. For example, during the pandemic, Parul went back to her village, where neither the electrical grid nor the smartphone network worked reliably. In her family of six, only her father, a farmer, had a smartphone, which she would borrow to attend online classes. However, the phone, a mid-range VIVO, heated up, turned itself off, and had a faulty camera. For online exams, students had strict instructions to be visible and audible. There

were a fixed number of warnings given if the phone rang, after which the exam paper would be automatically submitted. Given the unreliability of her father's phone, Parul had to rig a three-phone system that would allow her to meet the requirements: she used her dad's phone for data, a phone she borrowed from a neighbor to be visible to the examiners on video, and a third phone (put on flight mode to avoid incoming calls) to do her actual exam. The neighbors were less than understanding when Parul repeatedly borrowed their phone, saying that she should buy her own. Eventually, the stress of the whole situation caused her to perform far worse in her exam than she had hoped.

Using a smartphone and sharing digital resources

Data cost was also a constant source of stress for many participants, as has been documented in other work ([Foster, 2018](#); [Venkatraman, 2017](#)). Parul was very clear that, while she had to borrow other people's smartphones for attending classes and exams, the "*data used was my own.*" Typically, respondents were on 1–1.5 GB-a-day plans, which had to suffice for classes, study, and preparing for exams. They described the complex negotiations and compromises that they had devised to go online. Many interviewees used Wi-Fi from a public place when they could, especially if they were using social media or downloading files ([Venkatraman, 2017](#)). They were very much aware of how much data the visual-heavy platforms, like Instagram, used, but were uncertain about how much data they had left at any given moment.

In a situation where resources are limited, the fear of exhausting data at critical times was a great source of anxiety. The ability to borrow data sometimes became intertwined with one's social capital and status; Ridhima reflected that she had very few "true" friends and linked her limited social support with her family's economic situation.

Yesterday, I was studying for two hours [at night] and data [suddenly] finished so I got very disturbed. I don't have anyone who can give me some data. You should

be more social because if you have friends [they can help by giving data] But then some people don't help, then you feel hurt. I ask and then they don't give [data].

Having a phone of one's own, and using creative strategies to conserve data, were necessary but not sufficient conditions for smartphone use. Kriya staff discussed how some women coming from economically and educationally disadvantaged homes could not independently use basic apps such as Instagram or Uber or Maps. Unlike young men attending the same sessions, these women would typically ask the Kriya staff to do it for them, illuminating a gendering of technology use. A smartphone's potential beyond simple telephony depends on digital skills ([Carboni et al., 2021](#)) and requires a certain self-assurance to dare to explore these unknown digital spaces, which many young women are taught are dangerous. Young people were vocal about requesting digital literacy training such as writing emails, using MS Office, or filling out an online form, but also how to use social media and navigate phone applications; so Kriya created specific training modules to address that.⁷ Staff at the NGO was keenly aware that smartphones were the main way to go online for many students, and thus essential to getting work. Indeed, on several occasions, the organization had provided smartphones to needy students and lent out laptops for work or internships: owning a phone and having access to training built skills, but also, perhaps more importantly, the confidence to use these skills, particularly among young women. After this first step, however, there was the transition to seeing the digital space as something that could be leveraged to fulfill one's aspirations.

Phones and social media as spaces for building aspirations

Being on social media is a quintessential part of owning a smartphone, and for these interviewees, social media was where online life in all its variety took place ([Venkatraman, 2017](#)). Our interviewees shared a dislike for the look and feel of Facebook, preferring the layout of Instagram, and enjoyed using Snapchat and YouTube. They used social media for sharing

“*chhoti*” or “small” news. Indeed, for many, social media provided most of their news, as well as announcements about exams and COVID-related lockdowns or the more quotidian campus gossip. While they prioritized education and work-related tasks, they used “leftover” data as a reward for viewing entertainment ([Arora, 2012](#)). Ridhima explained that at night she used leftover data to watch Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts to “*make the mind fresh*” and relax. Interviewees noted that WhatsApp was part of everybody’s daily routine, its use wavering between relaxed social networking and use for school where it had become essential for updates from class and exam groups.

The integration of online sources into study routines was a common activity. Our participants described Googling answers, finding YouTube lectures on their topics, and even asking online groups questions about schoolwork, work, and careers. YouTube was a learning portal to search for concepts they did not understand in class or in their books. Shuchi explained that “*the eyes like seeing things*,” that is, learning is easier if one sees concepts unfold, rather than just reading about them. During the pandemic, students were frustrated about how tough it was to learn using small screens, unstable connections, and with limited engagement with peers and teachers, so they turned to Google. Rather than reading a whole book, Vidya found channels for the top 30 questions to pass an exam; when she had to make a presentation on “low-fidelity technology,” she located lectures in English which she could then condense into 15-minute presentations in a mixture of Hindi and English for class. Relying on Google and social media extended to career-building strategies, with interviewees sending each other links to YouTube channels or Instagram accounts that covered different aspects of career-building such as strategies to get jobs, motivational talks about work and life, work skills, and advice on careers. When learning how to tackle job interviews, Sona learned how to carry out group interviews by searching online. This strategy was successful, as she got offer letters from several employers.

On Instagram, following career-specific accounts was relatively rare, but almost everyone followed at least one motivational account, usually in Hindi. An example of this kind of account was “Motivation Success,” which used unrelated images of pop-culture icons to showcase quotes

in English. Content in these motivational accounts is highly aspirational, seemingly inspirational, and leaving virtually no room to fail, or to be meek or negative. It creates a do-or-die mentality (Poonam, 2018), which came out in the determination that some participants expressed when talking about their aspirations. This theme of motivation and aspiration was visible in young people's Instagram posts and even in their WhatsApp status. Sona was only 18 when she completed her electronics diploma and received several corporate job offers even before her final year exams, the first in her family to get formal work offers at such a young age. She was more privileged than other participants in terms of caste, social status, and family income and she had always been very driven to get a government job. Her Instagram profile name was titled "MY.SC.DREAM," referring to her dream of clearing the UPSC exam to become a police officer and finally have the prestige of wearing the "uniform." She preferred to not have friends or family following her on her Instagram account and posted only motivational quotes. When asked why she had such a focused username and account, she answered that she wanted to give other young women a message, namely, that they should share their dreams and aspirations. They needed to create their own profile, intended not just to socialize online as a social media profile, but also for creating an outward-facing sense of self. She said, "*By doing this [sharing dreams on Instagram], who knows what help they may get?*" Indeed, that is what had happened to her. Strangers reached out to her and gave her valuable notes for the UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) exam⁴. When asked why they shared these notes, she said that they liked that she was an engineering student, that her dream was so clear, and that her profile was not all videos and selfies but rather motivational content for others. One person who shared notes for the exam with her said he appreciated that she had stated her aspirations before she achieved them.

WhatsApp was also important, not only for messaging but also for other forms of social engagement that are more typically associated with Instagram or Facebook. The interviewees used WhatsApp to share content, make posts, and comment on statuses. They often changed their display pictures and status to communicate and connect with different audiences. They found it easy to post on WhatsApp and noted that their posts reached more people than on other

platforms. Parul had been comparing views on WhatsApp and Instagram and realized that more people saw her status on WhatsApp than Instagram stories. WhatsApp was also preferred because it was not as data-heavy as other apps and thus data use could be somewhat controlled by waiting (or avoiding) to download heavy files like photos and videos. Some interviewees noted that on WhatsApp only one's saved phone contacts can see one's profile details like display photos or statuses; so respondents felt they had more control over their audience, because they knew who could access these personal posts. They also felt it was easier to be online using WhatsApp since their parents, who tended to use and thus be more familiar with WhatsApp, saw it as a safer alternative to other social media platforms.

These uses of smartphones were both pragmatic and aspirational. The devices facilitated the interviewees belonging to the "here and now" (studying, applying for jobs, relaxing). They also supported their desire to stretch their horizons and sense of possibility as they took small steps toward their imagined futures. Sona had by far the most concrete and articulated strategy in this area, but many expressed similar ambitions. However, as Vidya said, owning a smartphone was essential to unlocking these aspirations, "*You can only post if you have your own phone. How can you [even] post from someone else's phone?*" Exploring the possibilities of different platforms and making choices on how to use them for self-expression required both time and privacy. Instead of Virginia Woolf's "money and a room of her own," these young women expressed a desire for a digital space of one's own, be it WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram. Their digital explorations were underpinned by secretive strategies to keep the extent of their social media use hidden from family. This was partly because of an implicit understanding that their use of these platforms would be frowned upon and partly to preserve a space to develop one's interests and contacts in an independent way. Echoing the notion of "under-the-radar use," Parul, for example, strategized her social media and phone use by using her college Wi-Fi, to both save data and to keep her social media use somewhat hidden from her parents, who did not know she used Instagram and Facebook. She was very aware that such restrictions applied only to girls. Similarly, when Lalita asked her mom about joining Facebook, her mother had agreed,

but only if she used her brother's name. Lalita was enraged: "*If I have my own identity, then why should I use my brother's?*"

For our research participants, phone ownership and social media use were still immersed in an environment where these were seen as potentially damaging for their reputation. This affected how these young women engaged with technology ([Wajcman, 2010](#)) and framed smartphone use as both a privilege and a necessity. While they noted the boundaries of the sanctioned use without transgressing them in an obvious way, they also found strategies to express their personhood and agency online as adults.

Conclusion

In India, state governments and organizations are handing out phones and tablets in the hope of connecting youth at the margins. Indeed, smartphone use and ownership, specifically among Indian women, is rising ([Carboni et al., 2021](#)). However, a smartphone's potential for future-building and creating "meaningful mobility" ([Tacchi et al., 2012](#)) depends on digital skills but also on the ability to safely use them in a way that aligns with individual aspirations and concepts of self ([boyd, 2014](#); [Tyers et al., 2021](#)).

Our participants were dependent on their families economically and socially, and there were societal limitations on their career-building as women ([Venkatraman, 2017](#)) that no amount of technology could overcome. However, they were able to leverage their phones to carve out autonomous spaces and develop their own understanding of themselves and their potential. Still, their continuing reluctance to admit to social media use is part of an internalized narrative that frames smartphones and social media as bad and socially unacceptable for them ([Tyers et al., 2021](#)). Despite the optimism of the early days of mobile telephony, which posited that it could empower women in the Global South and help them overcome deeply entrenched social structures, research has shown that such structures soon reassert themselves ([Oreglia & Srinivasan, 2016](#)). Gains in social standing and economic independence that are made possible

by digital technologies are incremental and can always be lost unless there are longer-lasting changes in society that are neither caused nor necessarily supported by such technologies.

Disruptive events such as a pandemic have the power to upend what seemed to be immutable social arrangements ([Hicks, 2017](#)). Protracted lockdowns caused by force majeure have made digital connectivity a necessity since the need to work and study online superseded concerns about how having and using phones may endanger young women. We showed how our research participants have leveraged this unique opportunity to seek an independent foothold in adult society. They exercised creative agency in both gaining access to and carving out a space for their own imagined futures using their own smartphones and social media accounts. Such use, albeit under the radar, was shaped by both their experience as women and an expression of their agency in exploring and locating their evolving sense of self in their personal and professional lives ([Wajcman, 2010](#)). Whether such gains will be reversed in the near future remains to be seen.

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Notes

- ¹ Throughout the chapter, the quotes presented were translated from Hindi to English by the first author.
- ² All names of organizations, people, and usernames or social media handles in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- ³ We use this term advisedly, as in this chapter we explore issues related to work, education, gender, and social standing. The intersection of caste, religion, and gender and certainly many other factors affect the meaning of “class” ([Guru, 2016](#)) in an Indian context and specifically in the use of ICTs ([Banaji, 2017](#)).
- ⁴ Getting a central government job involves taking a monumental, national-level standardized test called the UPSC which is seen as a gateway to respect, a stable income, and often other perks.
- ⁵ One way to understand the “modest background” of participants is to see how much they can access technology. None of the young women in this piece had access to their own laptops and getting a smartphone was not a small expense for the family. Equally, for the participants, running out of data was an issue because, a top-up, which costs GBP 2–5 is also not an easy expenditure (while keeping in mind that they are not earning a salary yet). From Kriya data, we have incomplete (and not representative at a population level) self-reported estimates of the range of family income (which are classically considered inaccurate but give a general idea of family income in this context), 16% of those for whom family income information was available ($N = 4,766$), thought their family earned less than Rs.25,000 a year (GBP 250) while 58% cumulatively said less than Rs.50,000 annually (GBP 500). Among

those who have a diploma or vocational course as the highest level of education in 2021, 54% said their family's income was in the Rs.25,000–50,000 income level (GBP250–500).

⁶ Recordings and online observations were all done with the specific consent of participants.

⁷ In the summer of 2021, over 7,000 Kriya alumni were asked an open-ended question about the skills young people needed to pursue their careers. More than one-third said they wanted essential computing or digital literacy skills. Kriya developed training geared at that, including exercises on how to open a LinkedIn account or sign up for a job website and link it to the students' email. Some training modules covered apps such as Google maps, and taught the basics of navigating social media. Such activities were often the first time some young people performed the act of “signing up.”