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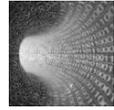
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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic study of the adoption and use of Facebook among urban Indian youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Mobile-centric use of the Internet is widely prevalent here as general packet radio service (GPRS)-enabled mobile phones and data plans have become increasingly affordable. Less privileged youth are the lead adopters of these new technologies, and typically the first generation of Internet users, in their communities. My research uncovers their leisure-driven engagement with new media, seen through the lens of Facebook use, and the development-friendly outcomes that result from it. By examining the direct and indirect affordances of Facebook perceived by these youth, this article highlights how they swiftly negotiate social boundaries and technological hurdles, transitioning into legitimate members of a global community.

Keywords

Agency, development, Facebook, India, Jugaad, mobile, new media literacies

Introduction

There is no such thing as one Facebook from the perspective of cultural relativity. Facebook is only the aggregate of its regional and particular usage. Miller (2011)

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New media research has traditionally focused on predominantly White regions of adoption and use. As new media technologies become more affordable, however, their penetration in the global south grows rapidly. This article draws attention to the new media practices of marginal users in the developing world by studying their “regional and particular usage” of Facebook (Miller, 2011). Eighty percent of Facebook users reside outside the United States, and developing countries such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia have the second-, third-, and fourth-largest number of Facebook users in the world (www.socialbakers.com, 2014). However, little attention has been given to the practices of these subscribers thus far, with prior research focusing predominantly on Facebook practices within the global north (Caers et al., 2013). By investigating Facebook adoption and use by urban Indian youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, my research contributes to fill this gap, as it draws attention to innovative emerging practices of these new technology adopters.

For the youth and communities I study, shared ownership of a computer remains a luxury, and mobile phones (including general packet radio service [GPRS]-enabled phones) are fast becoming ubiquitous. As mobile technology becomes more advanced and more affordable, it offers these youth a new means of interacting with the world, Facebook being one such. These youth are literate but not conversant in English, which is the language of the State, of the rich, and of the Internet. Despite various social limitations, they make up a dynamic group of individuals who possess the agency to engage with and innovate around now-affordable new media technologies, instead of remaining passive beneficiaries of development objectives of the State and aid organizations. These engagements and innovations are a recent phenomenon, resulting from the increased penetration of mobile technology in resource-challenged regions. This article offers a rich understanding of a unique stream of new and potential Facebook users emerging from a large and rapidly expanding group of new technology adopters for whom the mobile phone is the primary (and sometimes, sole) means of navigating the Internet. They are youth who have thus far been excluded from the process of globalization, but attest to the rapid democratization of new media, which now allows them to create a transnational identity for themselves for the very first time.

There is a general assumption that these low-income, marginal users would (or *should*) choose to capitalize on media technologies for virtuous or pragmatic purposes. According to Ganesh (2010),

the diverse ways in which the poor and the marginalized use media technologies in their everyday lives for social networking, entertainment, ... and to express and experience their sexuality, relationships, pleasure and intimacy in ways that could also be considered empowering

have thus far been ignored. I use my findings to show that some of these ways can indeed be empowering. Thus, I push for going beyond a needs-driven view of new media use to examine how these users might lead themselves toward self-empowerment when they engage in non-instrumental uses of technology. As Freire (1972) argued, “development can only be achieved when humans are ‘beings for themselves’, when they possess their own decision-making powers ...” (cited in Bailur, 2007). This article is an effort toward seeing marginal populations as *beings for themselves* and agents of

development, as they proactively make decisions toward integrating new media technologies into their daily lives.

This article thus situates itself in the larger context of the development discourse, wherein a large number of technology projects have been accused of stemming from “colonial” computing inclinations (Dourish and Mainwaring, 2012). Traditionally, technology has been limited in its spread and impact, but the rapid penetration of affordable mobile technology in remote regions of the global south offers a compelling case for researching its adoption in these parts. Recent Information and Communication Technology (ICT) research focusing on developing regions has drawn attention to diverse technological initiatives but has largely been embedded in a socioeconomic focus, leaving new media adoption and use relatively unexplored. Leisure-driven use of technologies such as Facebook has received little or negligible attention in the context of this discourse.

This article is structured as follows. The next section provides a review of relevant literature on Facebook and mobile practices in the developing world before introducing the analytic lens of participatory culture and new media literacies that I use in this article. I then discuss the notions of *aspirations*, *avenues*, and *agency* that I use to annotate my research. In the following sections, I describe my research methodology and findings, before outlining the key takeaways of my research. I conclude with suggestions for future research in this domain.

Related work

Caers et al. (2013) recently published a comprehensive review of the literature on Facebook in the economic and psychological domain, also highlighting the gaps that remain to be filled. Research on Facebook use in a non-American, non-European context is one such area that requires further investigation. However, this is a research domain not completely untouched. Miller (2011) addresses this gap with a comprehensive ethnographic account of Facebook practices in Trinidad, also highlighting that the adoption and use of Facebook there are influenced greatly by Trinidadian culture. Other works in this area include Wyche et al.’s (2013a, 2013b) qualitative studies of Facebook use in Kenya; Peters et al.’s (2012) comparison of Facebook use among Americans, Namibians, and expatriate Namibians; and Bosch’s (2009) study of the use of Facebook in a South African university. I extend this literature by examining Facebook practices among young marginal users in urban India, highlighting their agency as they navigate various sociological and technological constraints.

There is a host of ethnographic research from developing countries that examines the adoption and use of new media, particularly the now-ubiquitous mobile phone (Horst and Miller, 2006; Kumar and Parikh, 2013; Miller and Slater, 2000), and emphasizes the interpretative flexibility of technology. Although the focus of developing world research on technology adoption and use has traditionally been on instrumental uses of this technology, there exists literature that examines the non-instrumental uses as well. Kolko and Putnam (2009) write about the benefits of gaming and how gaming promotes digital literacy. Smyth et al. (2010) and Kumar and Rangaswamy (2013) show how mobile adoption is driven by widespread consumption and sharing of entertainment media. Arora and

Rangaswamy (2013) stress the importance of research on leisure-driven use of new media technologies in the developing world to uncover how this self-motivated use could lead to development in ways that might otherwise go unnoticed. My research aligns with and extends this body of work by investigating how leisure-driven use of Facebook results in development-friendly outcomes.

This article uses Jenkins' research on *participatory culture* and *new media literacies* conducted among American teens (Jenkins, 2009) to examine new media behavior of the marginal youth in urban India. While there are sociocultural differences in the ways of expression that these youth choose, Jenkins' set of literacies affords a new perspective from which to view the technological practices of the youth I study. Along these lines, Ito et al. (2013) call for a broadened access to learning that is "*socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity*" (emphasis in original). Gee (2004) also refers to informal learning spaces as ideal learning environments or "affinity spaces," suggesting that people learn better through popular culture than with textbooks. I extend this research done in an American context to examine the various kinds of learning that take place when less formally educated youth from resource-challenged backgrounds in India engage with Facebook.

Aspirations, avenues, and agency

The last few years have seen the rise of a media audience in India who will "go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins, 2006). Jeffrey (2010) presents the daily condition of educated, unemployed young men in North India, where he describes them as "waiting." In this state of waiting, they are drawn toward opportunities that allow them to "acquire skills, fashion new cultural styles, and mobilize politically" (Jeffrey, 2010). My findings focus on the participation of similarly unemployed or underemployed youth in popular and affordable technological practices they find emerging around them. *Aspirations* come into being at this stage, big or small, whether they are aspirations for a well-paying job or for learning to buy train tickets from the Indian Railways web site. The growing *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2009) offered by increasing access to the Internet pulls more and more youth into its fold as they learn to navigate the Internet in search of experiences that they consider enriching. This includes email and chat at the minimum, but also extends to online games and social networking. Barriers to entry are low, and information and experience are passed on from old members to the new, as described in my findings below.

These youth create *avenues* for fulfilling their aspirations. They are immersed in the culture of *jugaad*, a colloquial Hindi term that is used variously to refer to innovative and improvised solutions that arise as workarounds or shortcuts in response to the scarcity of resources such as time or money. According to Radjou et al. (2012), *jugaad* is about "doing more with less." It is by way of *jugaad* that these youth create and operate Google and Facebook accounts, navigating their way through a new and unfamiliar Internet. As I describe below, they encounter various roadblocks along the way but keep going. In this process of exploration, they rapidly cultivate "a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape" that Jenkins (2009) labels *new media literacies*. These include *play* or the ability to experiment with

surroundings as problem-solving, *appropriation* or the ability to meaningfully consume and share media content, *collective intelligence* or the ability to pool knowledge with others toward a common goal, and *negotiation* or the ability to interact with diverse communities and respect multiple perspectives, among multiple others. While the youth I study (18–22 years of age) are older than the teens Jenkins studies, and operate in a starkly different sociocultural context, the nature of their interactions with technology affords them similar learning experiences as the teens. This will also be clear from the findings I present below.

As the agency of these youth leads them to acquire a new set of skills or literacies, they begin to create for themselves the promise of self-empowerment. By showing how these youth become agents of change in their lives, I seek to broaden the development lens by including within it development-friendly interpretations of leisure-driven new media use. My research thus aims to substantiate Arora and Rangaswamy's (2013) claims that an open-ended agenda toward new media research among these users can be instrumental toward generating new ways of witnessing new practices. A new way of seeing here *is* essential, for these marginal users have never before had affordable access to consuming *and* generating content with new media. Understanding their practices and appreciating their *jugaad* mechanisms can lead to a more nuanced understanding of technology adoption and use in the global south than we have at present.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in New Delhi between October 2011 and April 2012, as part of a longer multi-sited ethnographic project that examined mobile media practices of youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in India. The data for this article are drawn from two groups of respondents. The first consists of a snowball sample of 25 Facebook users. They are male, 18–22 years old, and come from families earning—on average—INR20,000 (US\$300) per month, translating on average to INR5000 (US\$90) per capita. Each of these families recently moved to Delhi from the states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar in search of better livelihoods. They now live in the Sewa Nagar neighborhood, amidst a larger migrant population. The parents have poor educational backgrounds—the mothers are generally illiterate or low-literate and the fathers have completed their 10th-grade education at best. The youth themselves have attended or are attending local government schools and colleges. Owing to teacher absenteeism and a culture of skipping classes, the students typically have a lot of time on their hands. This is when they conduct the technological explorations that are the object of this study. The second group of respondents for this study included mobile retailers from 10 shops in the Sewa Nagar, Meharchand, and Khanna markets (all located within a mile of each other) who were informed of the mobile practices of the above-mentioned youth. These retailers were all male, adept users of varied mobile devices, studiously aware of mobile trends, and catered to a diverse clientele.

The study did not intend to focus on a male population from the start. As I attempted to identify active Facebook users among my preliminary set of interviewees (roughly 40 young boys and girls), I found that the girls lagged behind the boys in their access to and use of technology, overall. The limitations placed by parents on their daughters' physical

freedom (to go out and interact with friends) extend themselves to online freedom as well. While parents of boys placed few restrictions on their Internet activity, the girls were allowed little time to use the Internet or Facebook. Mobile use was also far more varied among the male participants. This apparent gender bias was unsurprising, given that the patriarchal Indian society subjects women and girls to greater confinement than men and boys. This is especially true in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The divide is just as visible when seen through the lens of technology access and use. The avenues (both physical and digital) available to the male youth are not available to the girls, further attesting to the strong influence that society exerts on the evolving participatory culture.

Having conducted 40 preliminary interviews, I identified 25 youth whom I interviewed again, and in depth. I used semi-structured interviews and participant observation for collecting data. I interviewed the youth in their homes, their friends' homes, or in their favored "hang out" spots. Each of these youth owned at least one mobile phone as the primary technological device and medium for connecting to the Internet. Several interview questions were directed to their use of the mobile phone for accessing the Internet and Facebook. As for the shop-owners and assistants, I spoke to them extensively in their shops and observed their interactions with customers. The interview protocols for both groups of participants were similarly targeted toward uncovering emerging mobile and Facebook practices of the youth.

The interviews were conducted in Hindi, my native language as well as that of the participants. There was no interpreter and all interviews took place one-on-one. I informed the participants explicitly and openly of my research objectives, and I have anonymized their names for their protection. I followed standard procedures for obtaining informed consent and digitally recorded and transcribed the interviews. Having grown up in New Delhi and being familiar with the socioeconomic conditions of various neighborhoods, I used existing ties with local residents to obtain access to these youth. Although being an "insider" (Hodkinson, 2005; Song and Parker, 1995) afforded me easier access, particularly due to familiarity with language and colloquial expressions, none of the youth who contributed to this study knew me prior to the study. Class differences were quickly perceived, making me enough of an outsider to them. At the same time, having been introduced by a trusted mutual acquaintance and being a young, female researcher pursuing a PhD in America allowed me to be read as harmless and interesting (as I was informed by my research contact). The fact that I offered 8-GB universal serial bus (USB) drives as a token of gratitude to my interviewees would likely have been an additional incentive to meet with me.

The data were transcribed, coded, and organized thematically by me to identify emerging patterns of Facebook use (Glaser and Strauss, 2012). Inspired by the approaches of Miller and Slater (2000) and Horst and Miller (2006), I looked for meanings of technology not predetermined by its form but deriving from the different ways in which different user groups interpret it. Analysis of the data revealed a prevalent underlying theme of learning and acquiring new skills (and building on them) that connected with Jenkins' studies of participatory culture and new media literacies. Using this lens allowed me to situate my findings in the context of dominant development narratives.

Findings

The findings of my study are organized as following. First, I present the varied motivations that led my study participants to become Facebook users to begin with. Second, I describe the direct affordances (Gaver, 1991) that Facebook offers these users that sustain their engagement, also noting the challenges that they overcome in the process. Third, based on my interview data, I suggest potential directions where this engagement appears to be taking them—the *indirect* affordances of Facebook. As Latour (1987) suggests, my focus here is not on the technology but what it enables and how the youth pursue their conscious acts of “configuration, mediation, and active interpretation,” that add value to it (Pinch and Bijker, 1984).

Facebook adoption has grown considerably with the adoption of the mobile Internet. Mobile phones have flooded the market, becoming increasingly inexpensive and more affordable for the masses. An interview with a retailer at Modern Communications—a small but well-equipped mobile shop in Khanna Market in New Delhi, with a socio-economically diverse clientele—revealed that youth these days are most keen on purchasing mobile phones “which have Internet.” Dinesh, an employee at Modern, told us that his customers are now only interested in phones that are 2G- or 3G-enabled. As a result, his employer requires that the salespersons all be adept at accessing and using the Internet, Google, and Facebook because “that is what the public wants.” The “public” may have wanted that earlier too but did not always have access to it. Price wars between mobile phone companies and mobile data providers have resulted in what one participant called “the mobile typhoon.” Not only have Internet-enabled phones become more affordable (now US\$30–US\$40 will buy a good Nokia 2G-enabled phone), but in the last 2 years the cost of getting Internet on the mobile has also reduced to less than US\$2 a month.

To understand the demand for Internet on the phone, it is helpful to note that these youth have never owned a personal device on which they could access the Internet. Some of the homes I visited did have a shared laptop, but various issues appeared to restrict its use for the youth I spoke to. First, they found the machine at home unattractive for use because it was typically old and dilapidated, often ridden with viruses. Second, they disliked having to share the machine with other family members. Rahul complained that he would have to wait for his older brother to leave the house in order to use their shared machine—“I never get a chance to use it otherwise.” Third, shared machine access also meant mediated Internet use by the parents. Mohit shared, “We want the computer for games and multimedia, not for work or studying—like my parents want. I want to use it for entertainment, chatting, sharing, games ... but my parents won’t let me.” Finally, there is the cost and hassle of setting up a wired Internet connection at home. According to Sanjay,

A wired connection is a pain to install. You have to call them multiple times to set up the landline first ... then it takes another few weeks to set up the net. The customer service is terrible—if anything goes wrong, no one knows how to fix it. What is the point?!

As for the cost, Pradeep shared,

Things are tough at home so I don't have a computer. I've had Internet on my Nokia mobile for the last 1.5 years. I get 1000 MB for a INR98 (US\$1.5) Airtel recharge. You can load anything on it. Seeing stuff doesn't take a lot of MB.

Mobile Internet addresses the above problems satisfactorily for my participants. They can use Internet on their relatively up-to-date mobiles and in their own time, obtaining unmediated access to "entertainment, chatting, sharing, games" at a far lower cost. As Dinesh at Modern said, "Laptops are now passé. Everyone has Internet on their phones now. That is all they want." Cybercafés also afford updated machines and personal and unmediated access. There is, however, the loss of mobility, and the hourly access rate (approx. INR20 or US\$0.30) quickly adds up.

While the utility of the 2G- or 3G-powered mobile phone for these youth is indisputable, another major driver of adoption is the "I want what he has!" phenomenon. With more advanced models regularly flooding the mobile market, the youth are driven to acquire newer, better phones all the time. Their first mobile phone is typically a gift from their father or older sibling (often used, occasionally new). Pradeep shared that he had "emotionally blackmailed" his parents into getting him a mobile phone: "I did not eat for two days and nights until they finally agreed." A phone does not last very long in the hands of these youth, however, and is traded-in every few months, sometimes every month, for a better phone. At the heart of this drive for more and better mobile technology, it turns out, lies a strong desire to be connected on Facebook. Mohan spends a minimum of 2 dedicated hours on his mobile every evening accessing Facebook. He says,

Because of Facebook, we are going towards more and more technology. My first mobile had a 2 MP camera. So when I got some more money, I wanted a better mobile with a better camera, so I could take better pictures on it and share these with my friends. If I go to a new place and don't take photos, my friends will say, "If you didn't take photos what did you do?" So I take photos and upload them right away ... Facebook has increased expenses for everyone (chuckles).

Dinesh, at Modern Communications, also claimed that Facebook was "creating a thirst" for better and more advanced mobile technology:

The phone has become like a status symbol. If one has a good phone, the other will also want the same phone. They carry it in their hand all the time ... it has become a part of their body, a part of their personality. If a guy doesn't have a good phone, everyone will look at him and say that he looks so old-fashioned, so backward, or that he is such a miser. Who would want to be that guy?!

Just as they are interwoven in the findings above, Facebook, personal and unmediated Internet access, and advanced mobile technology are innately linked in the minds of these youth. Together these create an identity that they consider critical for social acceptability.

I now discuss the direct affordances of Facebook that keep them engaged. "Chatting" was the first affordance that had every participant hooked to Facebook. I was informed that a major motivating factor was the government regulation that no mobile user could

send more than 200 short message services (SMSs) per day¹ (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2012). This led several of my participants to discover that Facebook afforded them limitless chatting, and better still, in real-time. As Amit who works at a mobile shop in Sewa Nagar shared,

Earlier there was no limit on SMS, but now there is a limit. On Facebook, you can chat as much as you want. If that is the case, why will anyone want to use SMS? Facebook chat is live, that is even better!

Mohan, too, chats with his friends through the day. In the 2 hours that he spends daily on Facebook, on average, he said,

I chat with my friends ... I have friends worldwide ... because of gaming. I play lots of games—Mafia Wars, Café World, Farmvilla ... these are just the ones I play every day. There are many, many more. You can get lost in them. On Facebook you meet a lot of new people, learn a lot of new things from them ... you get entertainment also. There were so many things I did not know about the world that I know now ... the world is so diverse, so big ...

Facebook represents, for these youth, the potential to connect to one another and to a global network that they did not have access to before. When Sanjay first joined Facebook, he and his (local) friends decided to compete over the number of people they could get to accept their friend requests:

I made 150 friends, but then I got stuck. Someone told me “Don’t send [friend requests] to Indians. There is a country. It is called Brazil. The people there are very friendly. Send them [friend requests].” So I sent them friend requests and they accepted. This is how I increased my friend count to 300.

Sanjay would have had limited access to these relationships in person, because of his caste, education status, and economic background. None of this mattered, however, while he was on Facebook, connecting with people across the globe. “Are you able to communicate with these friends?” I asked. Sanjay responded,

At first it was hard ... they did not speak English. I did not understand what they were saying to me. Then I asked someone. They told me that in Brazil they speak a language that starts with a P ... but I can go to Google Translate and understand what they are saying. A girl called Monica accepted my friend request. She wrote me a message saying “How are you? Reply me must. I am waiting.” I went to Google Translate and wrote her a reply in English. Then I converted it back to that language and sent her the message.

Not only did Sanjay figure out how to communicate with users across the world, he made a schedule of who would be awake at what time, after looking at time differences between various countries and India: “When it was morning in Indonesia, I would say ‘good morning’ to my Indonesian friends ... like that ...”

Sanjay’s English, like the others’, is broken at best. So how do these users communicate, even if they are able to use Google Translate to translate from English to foreign

languages? Raju, who recently migrated to Delhi from his village in UP, shared how he overcame this barrier:

The main barrier for people is their education, because of which they are unable to figure out [the Internet]. They change the language on their phone to Hindi, but the language of the Internet is English. If they do this, how can they move forward? If we try, what can't we achieve? If we try, we can achieve anything. If they don't know English, they can make an effort. If they try, then can begin by learning to read every letter of the alphabet, one by one. My teacher in school told me to look at an English newspaper. First I looked at the figures, then I started reading the headlines. Slowly, slowly I started to understand. Now I can read everything on the Internet.

We see here the spirit of *jugaad* that brings these youth to accomplish feats that might normally have been considered to be outside of their reach. Their desire to navigate the Internet and to communicate across linguistic barriers and geographic boundaries drives them to invent avenues of learning where none had existed. Sanjay also shared the ways in which he had learned:

The environment teaches us. At first no one I knew used the net. Slowly my friends started saying to each other "Meet me online, meet me online." I wondered what that meant—to meet online, or to chat. I stored all these words in my head, then one day, I summoned the courage to ask a friend what they meant. He told me, "Come to the cybercafé, I'll show you." I had to buy him two hours of net access before he showed me how to create my Gmail and Yahoo IDs. The guy who runs the cybercafé—he also helped me when I had problems ... Slowly I learned everything. First I learned to download themes. I would download 60–70 themes in one shot. Then I learned to download songs—there are several sites where you can download any song you want. Now I have figured out everything—songs, movies, YouTube, Facebook. Earlier I did not like taking photos. Now I take lots of photos and share them all with my friends.

The environment taught Sanjay, who in turn has shared his lessons with several others. He takes pride in teaching his friends how to use the Internet and connect on Facebook:

Now my personality has become such that I will get jealous if my friends go to anyone else. They must come to me. I love explaining everything to them. There is a friend who comes every Saturday and I teach him. Then there is a *halvai* (sweet maker) who is illiterate. I teach his children how to use the Internet. It makes me feel smart ... useful.

Sanjay's desire to share his net expertise with his friends and family was shared by several other participants. There are helpful *mediators* (Latour, 2005)—friends, relatives, mobile retailers—who teach them how to go online, Google for music and movies, and create Facebook accounts on newly acquired Internet-enabled mobiles. Dinesh mentioned that, earlier in the day, a taxi driver had come in and asked for a phone on which he could use Facebook:

Customers ask us how to go on Facebook. This is the reason we have a job. Knowledge doesn't come all at once ... it comes slowly, slowly. If you haven't used something, how will you know how it works? Knowledge takes time to spread.

These mediators, however, are not the only avenues of learning. For those who desire more guided instruction, there are locally administered 3-month and 6-month computer courses that have become very popular. They are designed to teach the basics of how to operate a Windows machine. Students learn to type, to create, store, and transfer files, to use tools such as Microsoft Office, and finally, to navigate the Internet and create email IDs and Facebook accounts. According to Surendra, who completed one of these courses, "If you do it [Facebook] regularly, you will become fast at it. It's not such a big deal, really. In 30 days you become comfortable. By chatting every day, my speed has improved a lot." Be it through these courses, or with varying levels of guidance from friends and family, these youth proactively overcome hurdles in the interest of sustained Facebook engagement. This does not imply that their understanding of how Facebook operates is complete or accurate. For instance, one of my participants was under the impression that he had to "apply" to Facebook for an account and that a human on the other end would evaluate his application and decide to accept it or not. He claimed that his first few applications had been rejected, but he would keep trying.

Once these youth learn to navigate their Facebook accounts, and overcome the initial learning hurdles, they act to create new avenues for themselves in order to realize their aspirations. Through maintenance of a regular communication channel with friends, one person's knowledge and skills find their way to another. Awareness of technological advancements, the world, current affairs, and even popular culture increases. The song *Kolaveri di* had become very popular with my participants prior to this study primarily due to being circulated widely on Facebook (Menezes, 2011). Entertainment, however, as I was told "is a passing phase." Users get their fill and move on to concerns of livelihood. From the initial desire to accumulate as many friends as possible, they become more strategic about who they "friend." Instead of focusing on virtual ties, the focus shifts to maintaining real ties, particularly the weak ones (Granovetter, 1973) that could prove fruitful in the future. Raju shared that Facebook allowed him and his friends to celebrate each other's birthdays that were earlier unknown to them. This would bring them to meet more frequently than before. He, among others, also stated that a big advantage of Facebook was that it allowed people to get back in touch after years of separation:

There was a classmate of mine from 12th grade who I had lost touch with after he moved. I looked for him and found him on Facebook. Now we are in touch. This is great! Similarly, when I lose touch with my friends today, I can look for them 10 years later and connect with them! Who knows, maybe years down the line my friend will be in a big company ... maybe then he can be of use to me.

The hope that Facebook may someday make itself useful in terms of gainful employment is also apparent in the profiles that I saw of my participants. I was told that it was normal to present oneself as better and more accomplished than one actually was. For example, a "BA Fail" would show up as a "BA Pass" and a "BA Pass" would show up as a "BA Honors." It was common to misrepresent schools and colleges as better schools and better colleges. Photos were seldom original, and often belonged to famous Bollywood celebrities. Facebook thus allowed these youth to represent themselves using their

aspirational rather than real identities. Most of my participants recognized and acknowledged this trend, and subscribed to it regardless.

Discussion

With the findings presented above, I uncover how the social circumstances of the youth that I study inspire diverse interpretations of technology. I also describe the challenges that impact their navigation of this technology and the innovative need-driven means they develop to overcome these challenges. *Aspirations* get created first, frequently driven by peer pressure and the thirst for leisure. Next, *avenues* are cleared to achieve these aspirations. Finally, the *agency* of these youth leads them to pursue these avenues relentlessly until their aspirations are indeed achieved. This also clears the space for a new set of aspirations. The primary focus of this article is on highlighting how these urban Indian youth, regardless of their socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, act to create avenues that allow them to fulfill their aspirations, using the lens of Facebook use.

Jeffrey (2010) describes *timepass* as a state of waiting. This is the state in which youth, for a variety of reasons, have idle time on their hands when they are unemployed or underemployed. My study examines how this waiting fully embraces the mobile typhoon, and in this process, allows the growing Facebook culture to take over. Making use of what they can afford, the youth use *jugaad* (or rapid workarounds) to adopt technological tools and services, and the affordances of these tools and services in turn expose them to new opportunities, causing them to develop newer aspirations. This process, directly or indirectly, iteratively leads these youth to acquire and hone new media literacies (Jenkins, 2009). Without answering the question that the title poses, this article aims to offer a compelling case for further examining whether these new media literacies do, in fact, contribute to self-empowerment.

While proposing that Facebook practices may drive self-empowerment, this article simultaneously aims to balance the technologically deterministic view that Facebook itself drives the change. The combination of social and technical developments that comprise the mobile typhoon described above makes it impossible to isolate the impact of Facebook had it not happened at the “right place and the right time.” Several participants claimed that there was nothing special about Facebook’s technology, but that it lay on the “What’s next? What’s next?” trajectory of technological advancements, right behind mobile phones and the mobile Internet. Viewing Facebook in light of this transience aids us in looking beyond its particularities, at the less transient agency of the youth I study.

This agency is frequently denied to marginal technology users in the traditional discourse of development, which focuses on ways in which technologies are or can be used to improve economic conditions. This narrow development lens can prevent us from observing the current innovative practices of existing users as they develop their own means of interacting with available, affordable technologies. Through the findings I present in this article, I argue that it is limiting to view mobile phones as enabling development only when they enable the transfer of funds or market information but not Bollywood songs. Studying leisure-driven technological engagement

can allow for a deeper understanding of technology adoption in the global south and development-friendly outcomes that might result (Arora and Rangaswamy, 2013). Jenkins' (2009) work on new media literacies offers us one lens, as mentioned above, to note the concrete set of skills acquired from this engagement.

In a heavily class- and caste-based society like India's, the youth I study are attempting to break out of these imposed social boundaries and expand their circle of relationships through Facebook. By embracing the *affinity space* of Facebook (Gee, 2004), these youth from the lower socioeconomic strata in India are able to consume, produce, and share content with other Facebook users around the world. This kind of interaction moves us toward greater democratization of new media, where youth from different class backgrounds are able to participate and interact on a common platform. There are still social boundaries to be navigated, however, before young women can afford similar levels of access.

Conclusion and future research

This article presents an ethnographic study of the adoption and use of Facebook among urban Indian male youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Recent ICT research focusing on the global south has drawn attention to diverse technological initiatives but has largely been embedded in a socioeconomic focus. The self-motivated adoption and use of new media technologies, driven primarily by a desire for leisure, has remained relatively unexplored. The primary contribution of this article is thus to offer a case study—"a regional and particular usage of Facebook"—and invite further exploration of leisure-driven uses of new media, whether or not they *directly* result in development-friendly outcomes.

The Internet-enabled mobile phone represents, for previously isolated users such as the youth in this study, the opportunity to be included in the process of globalization by connecting to others in a worldwide network. Facebook offers them the avenue to orchestrate cross-cultural encounters and generate international ties, changing their sense of the wider world and their place in it, as reformulated through Facebook. They learn to navigate their social terrain in a number of roles as an individual, a member of a socially networked group of friends, and with a transnational identity. Thus, Facebook derives a variety of meanings for these users as entertainment provider, an avenue for networking and growing friends, a means of self-development, and more. These meanings are denied to young women, however, as social factors play a role in restricting their access to and activity on the Internet in three ways. First, parents tend to be far more inclined to restrict online time for their daughters, for safety concerns or fear of negative influences. Second, boys in the family typically get first dibs for use of household assets such as laptops and smartphones. Finally, the physical spaces that allow for the participatory culture above to flourish are not similarly available to young women.

This article is not about Facebook alone. With increasingly affordable technological devices, there is far greater access to media consumption and production in India, as well as to other less developed parts of the global south. The combination of a growing participatory culture and tendency for *jugaad*, as shown above, is creating

new avenues for self-expression and self-empowerment for the less privileged. There is a need to explore the gender divide that is exacerbated in the process, however, as young women get left out of the participatory culture this article discusses. There is considerable potential thus to extend this work and gain a deeper understanding of users and user agency in other constrained circumstances across the world, to learn to appreciate how innovative workarounds can create opportunities where none existed, and to explore that “converged environment in which the lines between leisure and learning, public and private, work and play are increasingly, and productively blurred (Livingstone, 2008).

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Note

1. The stated reason for this government ruling was to restrict spam generated from telemarketing.

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Author biography

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