RECLAIMING EMPATHY IN THE AGE OF SCREENS: A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE ON TECHNOLOGY, HUMAN VALUES AND LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has transformed human civilization from physical communities into networked societies. From smartphones and social media to online education, gaming, artificial intelligence and digital workspaces, screen-based interaction now shapes the behaviour of children, youth, adults and elderly people. While digital platforms have expanded access to knowledge, expression and connection, they have also raised concerns about emotional detachment, cyberbullying, online aggression, distracted behaviour, mental health risks and declining face-to-face social engagement.

This paper examines the relationship between screen use and empathy from social, behavioural and legal perspectives. It reviews global and Indian evidence on screen time, youth behaviour, cybercrime, online harms and mental health. Studies suggest that heavy non-school screen exposure among teenagers may be associated with adverse outcomes such as depression symptoms, anxiety symptoms, irregular sleep and insufficient peer support, though the impact of technology depends significantly on how it is used. At the same time, digital access can support education, rescue work, civic engagement, legal awareness and social movements, making it necessary to avoid a simplistic anti-technology approach. UNICEF notes that digital technologies are now important for learning, friendship and future skills, while also creating risks relating to harmful content and abusive online experiences.

The paper further analyses India's legal framework, including the Information Technology Act, 2000, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, alongside international approaches such as the European Union's Digital Services Act. It argues that law must move beyond punishment and focus on prevention, digital citizenship, platform accountability and protection of human dignity. The paper recommends practical reforms such as digital empathy education, responsible platform design, anti-cyberbullying mechanisms, restorative digital justice, privacy-by-design, digital well-being audits and youth-led

digital responsibility programmes.

Keywords: Empathy, Screen Time, Youth, Digital Citizenship, Cybercrime, Human Values, Constitutional Morality, Online Harm, Legal Reform

1. Introduction

Human society has always evolved through communication. Early communities relied on oral traditions, physical presence, collective labour and direct emotional exchange. With the invention of writing, printing, telegraphy, radio, television, computers and the internet, human communication gradually shifted from immediate face-to-face interaction to mediated interaction. The smartphone era accelerated this transformation by placing the digital world in the hands of individuals across age groups.

Today, screens are no longer limited to entertainment. They are used for education, work, governance, banking, shopping, healthcare, social relationships, political expression and legal awareness. UNICEF observes that the internet is no longer merely a luxury for children but has become important for playing, learning, keeping in touch with friends and family and building future skills. The digital revolution has therefore produced both opportunity and anxiety.

The concern addressed in this paper is not whether screens should exist, but whether excessive or irresponsible screen-mediated interaction weakens empathy. *Empathy may be understood as the ability to understand and respond to the feelings, dignity and lived experience of another person.* It is essential for family life, community relations, democratic dialogue, constitutional fraternity and peaceful coexistence.

2. Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to:

1. Examine the historical and social transformation from physical communities to digital societies.

2. Analyse the relationship between screen use and empathy among youth.

3. Review available global and Indian evidence on screen use, behaviour, cybercrime, mental health and social interaction.

4. Study the legal and legislative framework governing digital conduct in India and abroad.

5. Examine case studies where digital technology either strengthened or challenged empathy.

6. Recommend practical, legal, educational and social reforms for reclaiming empathy in the digital age.

3. Research Questions

1. How has screen-based communication changed human behaviour and social relationships?

2. Is there a link between excessive or irresponsible screen use and reduced empathy?

3. What behavioural, social and legal harms are associated with digital interaction?

4. How do Indian and international legal frameworks respond to online harms?

5. What case studies demonstrate positive or negative digital empathy?

6. What legal reforms can promote empathy, dignity and responsible digital citizenship?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Digital Evolution and the Rise of Screen-Mediated Society

Human communication has historically moved from oral traditions and physical communities to written records, print culture, telecommunication, broadcast media and finally internet-based interaction. The modern screen—mobile phone, laptop, television, tablet, gaming console and wearable device—has become the primary gateway through which individuals learn, work, socialize, shop, express opinions and seek entertainment.

UNICEF notes that digital connectivity has expanded dramatically, with nearly **five billion people connected globally**, and that the internet is no longer merely a luxury for children but a medium for learning, friendship and development of future skills. At the same time, UNICEF highlights a global digital divide, noting that an estimated **1.3 billion school-aged children**

aged 3 to 17 do not have internet access at home, which shows that the digital age creates both inclusion and exclusion.

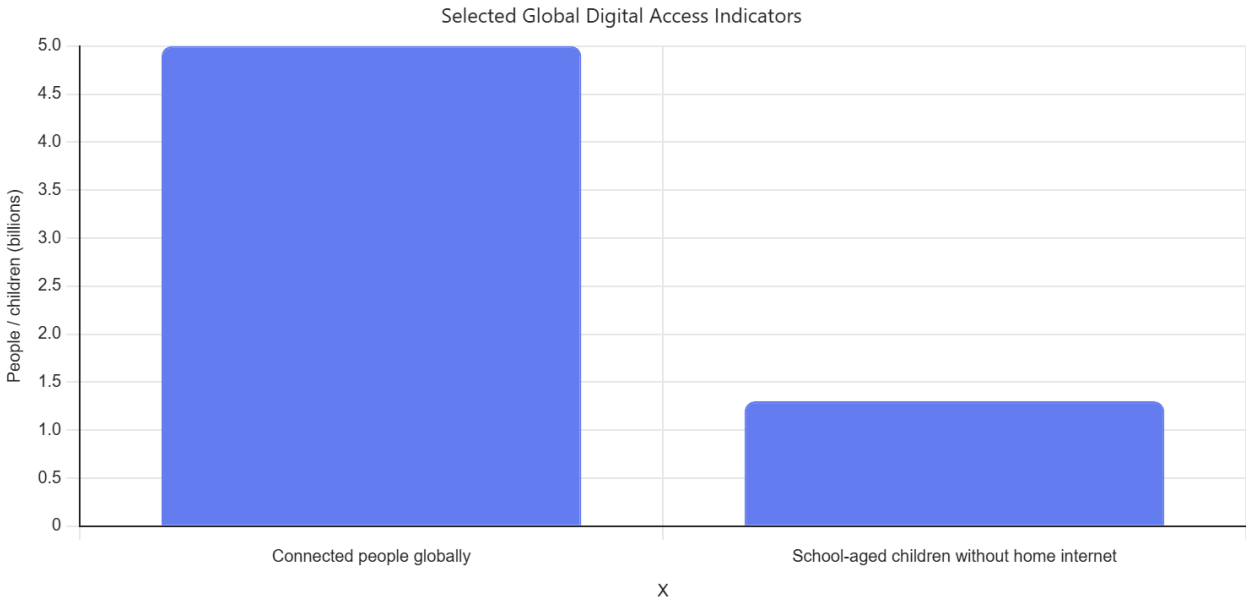

Chart 1: Selected Global Digital Access Indicators

This chart shows the contrast between global connectivity and the continuing lack of home internet access among many school-aged children. One may see that digital policy must protect users from harm while also ensuring equitable access.

4.2 Screen Time and Youth Well-being

Research increasingly cautions against treating all screen time as the same. A Yale School of Medicine discussion on teen technology use emphasizes that the question is not only "how much" technology young people use, but also "how" they use it, because educational use, creative production, social communication, passive scrolling and gaming may produce different emotional outcomes.

A 2025 study published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that teenagers reporting **four or more hours of non-school screen time daily** were more likely to experience adverse outcomes, including infrequent physical activity, irregular sleep, weight concerns, depression symptoms, anxiety symptoms, insufficient peer support and lower social-emotional support.

An umbrella review in *Nature Human Behaviour* found that youth screen time has both positive

and negative associations with health and educational outcomes, but many effect sizes are small and context dependent. This is important because it prevents an extreme conclusion that "screens destroy empathy"; instead, the more accurate conclusion is that certain patterns of screen use may weaken social and emotional development if not balanced by meaningful offline interaction.

4.3 Screen Use, Emotional Development and Empathy

Empathy depends on the ability to understand another person's emotional state, pain, dignity and perspective. Face-to-face communication allows individuals to process facial expressions, tone, silence, body language and immediate emotional responses. Digital communication often removes or weakens these cues. This may explain why online spaces can sometimes encourage harsh comments, trolling, cyberbullying or emotionally detached behaviour.

The American Psychological Association reported a 2025 meta-analysis of **117 studies covering more than 292,000 children worldwide**, finding a reciprocal relationship between screen use and socioemotional problems: increased screen use may contribute to emotional and behavioural difficulties, and children with such difficulties may turn to screens as a coping mechanism.

The WHO's guidance for children under five emphasizes reducing sedentary screen time, improving sleep and increasing active play for healthy physical and mental development. Although this guidance concerns younger children, the broader principle is relevant for youth: human development requires active, relational and embodied experiences, not only digital exposure.

4.4 Screen Time, Green Time and Social Balance

A systematic scoping review published in *PLOS One* examined screen time and green time among children and adolescents and found that high levels of screen time generally appeared associated with unfavourable psychological outcomes, while exposure to nature or "green time" appeared associated with favourable psychological outcomes.

This is useful in the present case because empathy is not developed only through lectures or rules. It grows through shared activity, public spaces, community life, volunteering, sports, nature exposure and intergenerational interaction. If screen use displaces these experiences, the

concern is not only digital harm but also loss of social learning.

4.5 Digital Harms, Cybercrime and Empathy Deficit

Cybercrime and online harm provide a practical illustration of empathy failure. Many digital offences involve a person using technology without considering the dignity, safety or emotional well-being of another person. These include cyberbullying, online harassment, impersonation, non-consensual sharing of personal information, fraud, intimidation, hate speech, trolling and digital humiliation.

In India, cybercrime has become a serious governance concern. A Press Information Bureau release citing NCRB data states that the latest published NCRB report for cybercrime statistics was for 2022 and refers to national initiatives such as the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre, National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal and the 1930 helpline. NCRB-related summaries report that registered cybercrime cases increased from **52,974 in 2021** to **65,893 in 2022**, with cyber fraud forming the majority of registered cybercrime cases in 2022.

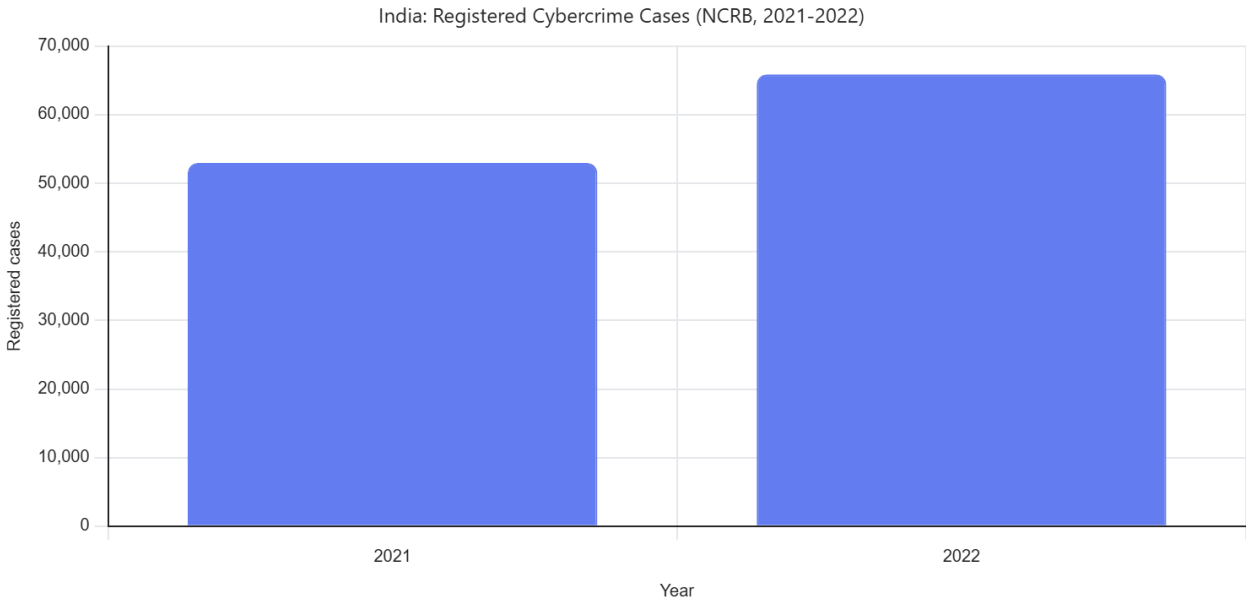

Chart 2: India -Registered Cybercrime Cases

The increase in registered cybercrime cases indicates that digital misconduct is no longer a marginal issue. It has direct implications for law, policing, education, platform governance and youth awareness.

4.6 Positive Role of Digital Technology

A balanced literature review must also acknowledge that screens can promote empathy when used responsibly. Digital platforms can support disaster relief campaigns, legal awareness, mental health support groups, disability inclusion, online education, civic participation, public-interest litigation awareness and youth-led social movements.

UNICEF recognizes that digital technologies can help children learn, communicate with friends and family and build skills for the future. Therefore, the correct research position is not anti-technology. The stronger argument is that society must develop **empathetic digital citizenship**, where technology supports human dignity rather than weakening it.

5. Legal and Legislative Framework

5.1 Constitutional Framework: Dignity, Liberty and Fraternity

The Indian Constitution provides the moral foundation for digital citizenship. The Preamble commits India to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Fraternity is especially relevant to empathy because it requires recognition of the dignity of every individual.

Article 19 protects freedom of speech and expression, but this freedom is not absolute. Digital expression must be balanced against public order, decency, morality, defamation, incitement and the rights of others. Article 21 protects life and personal liberty and has been interpreted broadly to include dignity, privacy and autonomy.

In the digital age, constitutional values require that online spaces respect human dignity, privacy, equality and responsible expression. The constitutional question is therefore: Can a digital society remain truly democratic if its citizens are connected by networks but disconnected from empathy?

5.2 Information Technology Act, 2000

The Information Technology Act, 2000 is the foundational Indian legislation for electronic records, electronic communication, digital signatures, e-governance, cyber offences and intermediary liability. The Act was originally enacted to provide legal recognition to electronic commerce and electronic communication, but it has also become central to cyber law

governance in India.

From the perspective of empathy and screen use, the IT Act is relevant because online misconduct often takes place through digital communication systems. However, many everyday empathy-related failures—insensitive comments, compulsive scrolling, emotional withdrawal and performative outrage—may not always amount to legal offences. This shows the limitation of relying only on punitive law.

5.3 Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 provides a framework for processing digital personal data in a manner that recognizes both the individual's right to protect personal data and the need to process data for lawful purposes. The Act contains obligations of data fiduciaries, rights and duties of data principals, provisions on consent and special provisions relating to children's data.

This law is important for empathy because privacy protection recognizes that every user is not merely "data" but a person. Misuse of personal data, behavioural profiling, targeted manipulation and exposure of private information can affect dignity, autonomy and psychological well-being.

5.4 Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 consolidates and amends the law relating to offences in India and replaces the Indian Penal Code framework. It deals with offences affecting the human body, offences against women and children, property offences, cheating, criminal intimidation, insult, annoyance and defamation.

The BNS is relevant to digital conduct because many online acts may involve intimidation, cheating, defamation, harassment, insult or threats. The BNS also applies to certain offences committed outside India, including offences targeting a computer resource located in India.

However, criminal law is mostly reactive. It operates after harm has occurred. For reclaiming empathy, preventive tools are equally important: digital literacy, early education, counselling, platform accountability and social responsibility.

5.5 International Framework: European Union Digital Services Act

The European Union's Digital Services Act provides a useful comparative model because it focuses not only on individual wrongdoing but also on platform responsibility. The DSA aims to create a safer and more trustworthy online environment and covers services such as social media platforms, marketplaces, app stores and other online intermediaries.

The European Commission states that the DSA strengthens users' rights through transparency in content moderation, appeal mechanisms, easier reporting of illegal content, protections for minors, advertising transparency and restrictions on manipulative practices. It also introduces enhanced obligations for very large online platforms and search engines, particularly where systemic risks may affect users.

The DSA is useful as a policy reference for India because it recognizes that online harms are not caused only by individual users. Platform design, algorithms, recommender systems, targeted advertising and dark patterns may also shape behaviour.

6. Analysis

6.1 Connectivity Without Compassion

Modern society is more connected than ever, but connection is not the same as compassion. A young person may have hundreds of online contacts but very few meaningful conversations. A post may receive thousands of views but little understanding. Digital platforms can create visibility without vulnerability and communication without emotional depth.

This creates what may be called a **digital empathy deficit**: a condition where people interact frequently but respond less sensitively to the dignity, pain and perspective of others.

This deficit is visible in cyberbullying, online shaming, hate comments, trolling, public humiliation, digital fraud, casual forwarding of harmful content, reduced patience for disagreement and outrage-driven debate.

6.2 Screens Do Not Automatically Reduce Empathy

While general perception is that "screens are bad." The evidence is more nuanced. Research shows that the effect of screen use depends on the type of use, and studies caution that not all

digital activities have the same emotional or behavioural impact.

For example, a video call with grandparents may increase emotional connection. Online legal aid awareness may promote justice. A mental health support group may reduce isolation. Educational videos may improve access to knowledge. Social media campaigns may mobilize relief and solidarity.

Therefore, the real issue is not screen use itself, but **unregulated, excessive, addictive, anonymous, hostile or manipulative screen use**.

6.3 Mechanisms Through Which Screens May Weaken Empathy

A. Loss of Non-Verbal Communication

Empathy depends heavily on non-verbal signals. In face-to-face interaction, a speaker can immediately see if another person is hurt, uncomfortable, confused or distressed. In online interaction, these signals are weakened.

B. Anonymity and Reduced Accountability

Anonymity can protect free expression in some contexts, but it can also reduce accountability. A person hidden behind a fake profile may engage in trolling, harassment or abuse more easily than in physical life.

C. Algorithmic Amplification

Digital platforms often reward engagement. Content that creates anger, shock or controversy may travel faster than calm and empathetic discussion. The EU Digital Services Act recognizes the need for platform accountability, transparency and risk reduction rather than treating online harm as only an individual problem.

D. Replacement of Community Experience

High screen time may displace sports, volunteering, reading, family discussion, outdoor activity and community service. The *PLOS One* review suggests that high screen time generally appears associated with unfavourable psychological outcomes, while green time appears associated with favourable outcomes.

E. Emotional Overload and Desensitization

Continuous exposure to violent news, online outrage, tragedy, memes and conflict may desensitize users. When suffering becomes just another scrollable item, young users may become emotionally fatigued rather than socially responsive.

6.4 The Four-Layer Governance Model

To reclaim empathy, responsibility must be distributed across four levels: individual, institutional, platform and State.

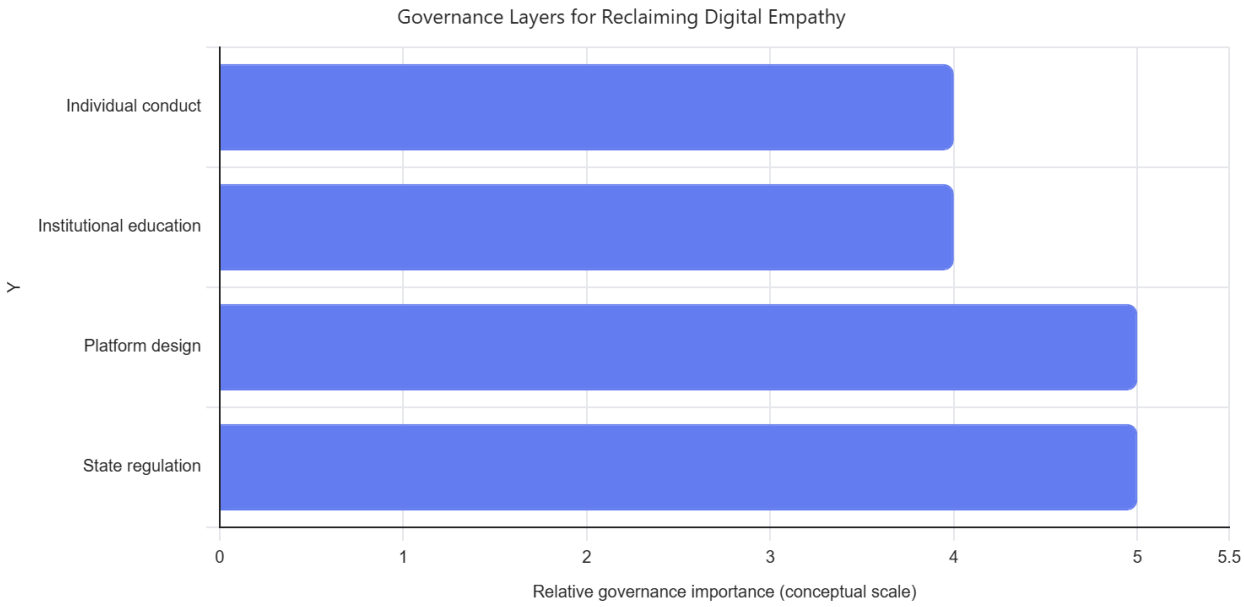

Chart 3: Governance Layers for Reclaiming Digital Empathy

The chart presents a conceptual governance model. Platform design and State regulation receive high importance because individual behaviour is strongly shaped by technological architecture and legal incentives. Institutional education and individual conduct remain equally necessary because empathy cannot be outsourced entirely to law or platforms.

6.5 Legal Analysis: Why Law Alone Is Insufficient

The IT Act, DPDP Act and BNS provide important tools to address cyber offences, data misuse and criminal misconduct. However, these laws mostly intervene after harm has occurred or when formal legal thresholds are crossed.

Many empathy failures occur below the level of formal crime: ignoring distress messages, publicly mocking classmates, sharing humiliating content, forwarding misinformation without care or treating people as content rather than human beings. Such behaviour may not always attract criminal punishment, but it damages social trust.

Therefore, legal reform must be combined with ethics education, restorative practices and platform design reforms.

7. Case Studies on Digital Empathy

7.1 Kerala Floods 2018 - Social Media as Compassion in Action

The 2018 Kerala floods provide a strong Indian example of how digital platforms can promote empathy when used for public good. During the floods, thousands of citizens used mobile phones, WhatsApp groups, social media and online platforms to coordinate rescue and relief efforts. Reports state that software engineers and volunteers worked with Kerala's government IT cell to create **keralarescue.in**, a platform through which volunteers could share urgent needs of stranded persons so that authorities could respond.

This case shows that screens do not necessarily reduce empathy. When digital tools are used with social responsibility, they can convert individual concern into collective action. Social media became a bridge between victims, volunteers, police, rescue agencies, donors and public authorities.

7.2 I4C Cyber Hygiene Initiative - Prevention Through Digital Responsibility

India's Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, has promoted cyber hygiene education to help citizens recognize digital threats and act safely online. The I4C cyber hygiene course is designed to equip youth with knowledge about cybercrime methods and safe online practices such as strong passwords, avoiding suspicious links and enabling two-factor authentication.

The National Cybercrime Reporting Portal provides citizens with reporting mechanisms for different types of cybercrime, suspicious identifiers and cyber safety resources. Cyber hygiene is usually discussed as a security concept, but it also has an empathy dimension: a responsible digital citizen avoids forwarding scams, spreading misinformation, participating in harassment

or exposing others to harm.

7.3 European Union Digital Services Act - Platform Responsibility

The European Union's Digital Services Act provides a comparative legal model for safer digital environments. The DSA imposes responsibilities on online platforms and requires protection of fundamental rights online, transparency in content moderation and enhanced protections for minors.

In July 2025, the European Commission issued guidelines on protection of minors under the DSA. These guidelines recommend private-by-default settings for minors, safer recommender systems, blocking and muting tools, improved moderation, reporting systems and reduction of design features that encourage excessive use.

This case study shows that empathy cannot be left only to individual morality. Platform design also shapes user behaviour.

7.4 Online Education and Digital Empathy

Research on digital empathy in online education found that the shift from physical classrooms to digital learning created challenges for empathy expression among university students. A comparative study involving Portugal and Romania observed that empathy can positively affect student satisfaction and learning outcomes, but the digital environment changes how empathy is expressed.

For students and youth, this is significant because online classes, digital assignments, webinars and virtual internships have become normal. Online education must not only transmit information; it must also preserve interaction, listening, peer support and teacher-student engagement.

7.5 Youth Digital Life, Social Connectedness and Empathy

A study published in *Pediatrics* observed that youth well-being, social connectedness, empathy and narcissism are central concerns in digital life. The study emphasized that outcomes depend on individual factors, type of digital media engagement and media context.

This supports the balanced argument that digital life is not automatically harmful or beneficial.

The effect depends on whether young people use digital platforms for meaningful communication, learning and support, or for passive scrolling, comparison, conflict and harmful behaviour.

8. Legal Reforms to Improve Empathy in the Digital Age

8.1 Introduce a Digital Empathy and Citizenship Curriculum

India should integrate **digital empathy, cyber ethics and constitutional values** into school and university curricula. Present cyber awareness programmes largely focus on fraud prevention, passwords, suspicious links and reporting mechanisms. These are important, but the curriculum should also include respectful speech, cyberbullying prevention, consent in data sharing, misinformation responsibility and empathy in digital communication.

8.2 Create a Statutory Duty of "Safety and Dignity by Design"

Indian digital law should move from a purely complaint-based model to a preventive design-based model. The EU Digital Services Act provides a useful example because it places obligations on online platforms to create safer digital spaces, increase transparency and protect users' rights.

Suggested measures include:

- Private-by-default settings for minors.
- Easy blocking and reporting tools.
- Transparent content moderation notices.
- Time-use reminders for young users.
- Restrictions on manipulative interface design.
- Clear grievance redressal timelines.
- Periodic public transparency reports.

8.3 Strengthen Anti-Cyberbullying and Online Harassment Frameworks

India already has provisions under the IT Act and BNS that may apply to cyber offences, electronic communication, cheating, intimidation, defamation and other harms. However,

many forms of cyberbullying fall into grey areas where victims may not know whether the behaviour is legally actionable or how to report it.

India should consider a specific **Online Harm Prevention Code** covering cyberbullying, coordinated harassment, impersonation, malicious sharing of personal information, repeated humiliation, deepfake-based reputational harm and threatening messages.

8.4 Establish Restorative Digital Justice for Minor First-Time Offences

Not every harmful online act by a young person should immediately result in harsh criminal prosecution. Some cases, especially involving students and first-time misconduct, may be better handled through restorative justice if the act is not grave.

For minor digital misconduct, law and institutional policy may allow:

- Written apology.
- Digital ethics counselling.
- Community service.
- Cyber safety training.
- Victim-sensitive mediation where appropriate.
- Repeat-offender escalation.

This approach helps wrongdoers understand the human impact of their conduct.

8.5 Make Platform Transparency Reports Mandatory

Platforms should be legally required to publish India-specific transparency reports on digital harms. The EU framework emphasizes transparency and accountability for online platforms.

Reports should disclose complaints received, types of harms reported, average response time, action taken, appeals filed, restored content, child-safety measures and steps taken to reduce harmful algorithmic amplification.

8.6 Add Empathy-Based Community Service to Digital Offence Sentencing

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 modernizes aspects of criminal law and includes

community service within the punishment framework for certain offences. For suitable digital misconduct cases, community service could include assisting cyber awareness campaigns, participating in legal literacy drives, creating anti-cyberbullying materials or supporting digital safety workshops.

8.7 Strengthen Data Protection for Children and Young Users

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 recognizes obligations relating to digital personal data and contains provisions on processing children's data. Since young users are vulnerable to profiling, addictive design and targeted influence, data protection must be connected with dignity and empathy.

India should consider stronger safeguards such as child-friendly privacy notices, limits on behavioural profiling of minors, age-appropriate design standards and independent audits of high-risk platforms used by young people.

8.8 Create Digital Well-being Audits for Educational Institutions

Schools, colleges and universities should not treat digital harm as only a police issue. Educational institutions are the first spaces where digital behaviour can be shaped.

Annual digital well-being audits may include:

- Cyberbullying complaints.
- Student screen-use concerns.
- Awareness programmes conducted.
- Mental health referrals.
- Student digital conduct policies.
- Use of online learning platforms.
- Faculty training on digital empathy.
- Confidential reporting mechanisms.

8.9 Establish Youth Digital Ombudspersons at University Level

Universities should appoint a trained **Digital Safety and Empathy Ombudsperson** or

committee to receive student complaints, provide first-level guidance, refer serious offences to police, coordinate counselling, conduct digital citizenship workshops and maintain confidentiality.

This would bridge the gap between law, education and emotional support.

8.10 Regulate Dark Patterns and Addictive Design

The EU minor-protection guidelines under the DSA recognize that platform design can contribute to excessive use and recommend disabling certain engagement-heavy features by default for minors.

Indian law should more clearly regulate design practices that exploit user attention, especially among youth. This may include autoplay controls, notification limits, transparent recommender systems, user control over algorithmic feeds and "pause before posting" prompts for potentially harmful content.

9. Findings

1. Screen use is now unavoidable and socially embedded.
2. The impact of screens depends on purpose, duration, content, context and user vulnerability.
3. Excessive or harmful screen use may be associated with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties.
4. Online anonymity and algorithmic amplification can weaken accountability and empathy.
5. Cybercrime and online harms demonstrate that digital behaviour has real-world legal consequences.
6. Indian law addresses cyber offences, data protection and criminal misconduct, but empathy cannot be created through punishment alone.
7. Case studies such as Kerala floods show that digital tools can also strengthen empathy

when used for public good.

8. A balanced legal approach must protect innovation while promoting dignity, safety and responsibility.

10. Recommendations

Based on above analysis and findings, it is recommend:

1. Introduce digital empathy and cyber ethics education in schools and colleges.
2. Create youth-led digital citizenship clubs.
3. Strengthen anti-cyberbullying laws and institutional mechanisms.
4. Require platform transparency reports.
5. Regulate dark patterns and addictive design.
6. Promote restorative digital justice for minor first-time offences.
7. Strengthen child data protection and age-appropriate design standards.
8. Establish digital safety ombudspersons in universities.
9. Conduct annual digital well-being audits.
10. Encourage screen-free community engagement, volunteering, legal aid work and intergenerational dialogue.

11. Conclusion

The age of screens is not a temporary phase; it is the new social reality. Technology has enabled education, communication, creativity, legal awareness and civic participation on an unprecedented scale. Yet the same technology can also produce alienation, aggression, distraction, cybercrime and emotional detachment when used without empathy.

The central issue is not screen use itself, but the loss of human values in digital interaction.

Empathy must be reclaimed through education, law, platform design, family practices, youth participation and constitutional morality. A humane digital society must protect dignity, privacy, fraternity and responsibility.

The case studies show that digital platforms can either weaken or strengthen empathy depending on design, use and governance. Kerala's flood-relief experience demonstrates that screens can become instruments of compassion. I4C's cyber hygiene initiatives show the importance of preventive digital education. The European Union's Digital Services Act demonstrates that platform accountability is essential for safer digital spaces.

The future question is not whether humans will live with screens, but whether they will remain human while doing so. Technology must serve life, not replace it. Digital progress must be guided by compassion, justice, dignity and universal brotherhood.

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