

Children in Institutional Care in the Digital Society: Ethical AI, Responsibility and Cultural Sustainability in Punjab

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly transformed contemporary social life, giving rise to what scholars often describe as a digital or networked society. In recent decades, digital innovations such as the internet, mobile communication, social media and online learning platforms have reshaped the ways individuals communicate, access information and participate in social institutions. Digital technologies now influence various spheres of social life, including education, governance, economic activity and interpersonal relationships. These transformations have expanded opportunities for knowledge sharing, social participation and connectivity across geographical boundaries. At the same time, the growing dependence on digital systems has raised important ethical and social concerns, particularly in relation to issues such as privacy, data security, digital inequality and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Children represent one of the most sensitive groups within this rapidly changing digital environment. Their engagement with digital technologies can provide important educational and developmental opportunities, yet it also exposes them to potential risks such as cyberbullying, online exploitation and exposure to harmful content. These concerns become even more significant when considering children who live outside traditional family environments, such as those residing in institutional care. Children living in institutional homes often come from backgrounds marked by poverty, neglect, abuse or family disruption. As a result, their well-being and development require careful protection through structured support systems and welfare institutions.

In the Indian context, the care and protection of children in vulnerable circumstances is governed by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. This legislation provides the primary legal framework for addressing issues related to child protection,

institutional care and rehabilitation. The Act establishes mechanisms such as Child Welfare Committees and Child Care Institutions that are responsible for ensuring the safety, care and social reintegration of children who are in need of protection. These institutions aim to provide shelter, education, healthcare, counselling and rehabilitation services that support children's overall development and prepare them for reintegration into society.

Within the context of an increasingly digital society, the everyday experiences of children residing in institutional homes are also being reshaped by digital technologies. Access to digital devices, online learning platforms and communication technologies has opened new possibilities for education, skill development and social connectivity. Digital platforms can enable children to access educational resources, participate in virtual learning environments and engage with broader social networks beyond institutional boundaries. These opportunities may contribute positively to children's academic development and future life prospects.

However, the integration of digital technologies within institutional environments also raises several important concerns. Issues related to digital safety, online privacy and unequal access to technological resources remain significant challenges. Children living in institutional settings may have limited supervision or guidance in navigating digital spaces, which can increase their vulnerability to online risks. Moreover, disparities in digital infrastructure across institutions may create inequalities in children's access to technological resources and learning opportunities.

In this context, it becomes important to examine how institutions responsible for child welfare manage children's engagement with digital technologies. This paper focuses on the experiences of children residing in institutional homes in Punjab and explores the ethical responsibilities of institutions, caregivers and policy frameworks in regulating digital engagement within these settings. By examining institutional care within the broader context of a digital society, the study seeks to highlight the importance of responsible digital practices that safeguard children's rights while also supporting their educational development, social inclusion and cultural well-being.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature on child protection and institutional care highlights the importance of supportive social environments for children who grow up outside family structures. Scholars have emphasized that institutional care systems must focus not only on physical protection but also on emotional development and social integration.

Studies examining institutional care suggest that children raised in residential institutions may experience challenges related to emotional attachment, identity formation and social belonging. Researchers argue that institutional settings must therefore provide holistic care that includes educational opportunities, psychological support and social integration programs.

Recent research has also focused on the impact of digital technologies on childhood and youth development. Digital platforms provide new opportunities for learning, communication and access to information. However, scholars caution that digital environments may expose children to risks such as cyberbullying, privacy violations and exposure to inappropriate content.

Despite increasing academic attention to digital society and child welfare, limited research has specifically examined the intersection between digital technologies and institutional care environments. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how digital engagement influences institutional care practices, ethical responsibilities and cultural sustainability.

3. Institutional Care and Child Protection

Institutional care refers to residential arrangements in which children who are deprived of parental care, abandoned, orphaned or otherwise in need of protection are placed in organised facilities designed to ensure their safety and development. Such facilities typically include children's homes, observation homes, special homes and shelter homes that function under the legal and administrative framework of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. This legislation provides the primary legal structure in India for the protection, care, treatment and rehabilitation of children who are either in conflict with the law or in need of care and protection. The Act emphasises a child-friendly approach and aims to ensure that children's rights, dignity and best interests remain central to all institutional interventions.

Within this framework, Child Care Institutions serve as important welfare mechanisms intended to provide safe environments for children who lack adequate family support. These institutions are expected to provide a range of services that contribute to the overall development and well-being of children. Such services typically include formal education, psychological counselling, healthcare facilities, recreational activities and vocational training programs. These provisions are designed to ensure that children receive not only basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing but also opportunities for personal growth, social learning and skill development. By facilitating access to education and life skills, institutional care aims to prepare children for independent living and eventual reintegration into society.

Institutional care also plays a rehabilitative role. Many children placed in such institutions come from situations involving poverty, neglect, abuse, trafficking or family disintegration. In these circumstances, institutions function as protective spaces where children can recover from difficult experiences and rebuild their sense of stability and security. Counselling services, educational support and social guidance are therefore essential components of institutional care systems. When effectively implemented, these measures can help children develop resilience and confidence as they transition towards adulthood.

Despite these objectives, sociological and child welfare research has pointed out that institutional environments may also create certain developmental challenges. Children growing up in residential institutions often experience limited personal interaction compared to family-based environments. The absence of consistent parental figures and emotional attachments can influence children's emotional development and sense of belonging. Some studies have indicated that children raised in institutional settings may struggle with identity formation, social integration and emotional expression due to the structured and regulated nature of institutional life.

Another important concern relates to the institutional structure itself. Institutional settings often involve routine schedules, collective living arrangements and administrative regulations that may limit children's opportunities for individual autonomy. While such structures are necessary for maintaining order and discipline, they may also reduce the flexibility and personalised care that children typically receive within family environments. As a result, contemporary child welfare policies increasingly emphasise the importance of child-centred approaches that prioritise emotional well-being, participation and individual development.

Child-centred institutional care focuses on creating supportive environments that encourage positive relationships between children and caregivers. Caregivers are expected to provide guidance, emotional support and mentorship that help children develop trust and social confidence. In addition, institutions are encouraged to promote participation in educational, cultural and recreational activities that foster social interaction and community engagement. These activities can help children build social skills, develop friendships and cultivate a sense of belonging.

In recent years, policy discussions have also highlighted the importance of integrating institutional care with broader community networks. Efforts to connect children with local communities, educational institutions and social support organisations can enhance their opportunities for social participation and long-term integration. Such approaches recognise that institutional care should not function in isolation but rather as part of a wider child protection system that includes families, communities and welfare institutions.

Overall, institutional care remains an important component of child protection systems, particularly for children who lack safe family environments. However, its effectiveness depends on the extent to which institutions are able to balance protection with emotional support, education and opportunities for social development. Strengthening institutional care therefore requires continuous attention to children's rights, well-being and participation, ensuring that institutional environments contribute positively to children's growth and future social integration.

4. Digital Society and Vulnerable Children

The idea of a digital society refers to a social environment where digital technologies are deeply woven into everyday life. From communication and education to entertainment and social interaction, digital tools now shape the ways individuals engage with the world around them. Sociologists such as Manuel Castells have described contemporary society as increasingly organized through digital networks that influence how information flows and how people connect with one another.

For children growing up today, digital technologies form an important part of their everyday experiences. Online learning platforms, educational applications and digital

communication tools have expanded access to knowledge and created new possibilities for interaction and learning. For children living in institutional care, these technologies can open doors that might otherwise remain limited. Access to digital learning resources can help support their educational development, while communication technologies may allow them to stay connected with peers, teachers and support networks beyond the institutional setting.

At the same time, the growing presence of digital technologies also brings new challenges. Children engaging with digital platforms may face risks such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content or violations of privacy. These concerns become particularly important for children living in institutional environments, who may already be in vulnerable circumstances and may require additional guidance when navigating digital spaces.

Another issue relates to unequal access to digital resources. Not all child care institutions have the same level of technological infrastructure or internet connectivity. As a result, some children may benefit from digital learning opportunities while others continue to face limitations. Addressing these disparities is therefore an important step toward ensuring that digital technologies contribute positively to children's development.

For digital engagement to be meaningful and safe, institutional support plays a crucial role. Caregivers and institutional staff need to guide children in using digital technologies responsibly and help them understand issues related to online safety and digital behaviour. Digital literacy education can equip children with the skills needed to navigate online environments with confidence and awareness.

In this context, ethical responsibility becomes central. Institutions responsible for child welfare must strike a balance between providing access to digital opportunities and ensuring adequate protection from potential risks. When digital technologies are integrated thoughtfully and responsibly, they can contribute not only to children's educational development but also to their social participation and sense of belonging in an increasingly digital world.

5. Cultural Sustainability in Institutional Settings

Children growing up in institutional homes often experience disruptions in their connections with family traditions, community networks and cultural practices. Cultural sustainability

refers to the preservation and transmission of cultural values, traditions and identities across generations.

Digital technologies can play a dual role in this context. On the one hand, digital platforms may help children access cultural knowledge, language resources and community traditions. On the other hand, excessive exposure to global digital culture without appropriate guidance may weaken connections to local cultural identities.

In the context of Punjab, maintaining connections with regional languages, traditions and social values is essential for children's sense of identity and belonging. Institutional environments must therefore create opportunities for cultural participation alongside digital engagement.

6. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design to examine the relationship between digital technologies and institutional care for children. The research aims to understand how the expansion of digital environments influences institutional practices, ethical responsibilities and cultural experiences of children residing in child care institutions.

The study primarily relies on secondary sources of data. These include government reports, policy documents, academic books, journal articles and research studies related to child welfare, digital society and institutional care. Legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 provide an important policy context for analysing institutional structures and child protection mechanisms.

The research also employs document analysis as a methodological approach to examine existing literature and policy documents related to digital technologies and child protection. Document analysis allows the researcher to interpret and synthesize information from various textual sources in order to understand broader social patterns and institutional practices.

The collected data has been analysed through thematic analysis, focusing on three major themes: digital engagement in institutional environments, ethical responsibilities related to children's digital safety, and the role of digital technologies in shaping cultural identity and social belonging.

The scope of the study is limited to institutional care settings in Punjab. As the research is primarily based on secondary sources, it does not involve direct fieldwork with children or institutional staff. Future research may incorporate empirical methods such as interviews, case studies or field observations to generate deeper insights into the lived experiences of children residing in institutional homes.

7. Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that the increasing integration of digital technologies into institutional environments has both positive and challenging implications for children residing in child care institutions. Digital technologies have gradually become part of everyday institutional life through the use of computers, smartphones, digital classrooms and online educational platforms. These technologies have expanded opportunities for children to access educational resources, develop digital skills and connect with broader social networks.

One of the most significant benefits of digital access in institutional care settings is its contribution to educational development. Online learning platforms, digital libraries and virtual classrooms can help bridge educational gaps that children in institutional homes may otherwise experience. Digital tools can also support skill development, enabling children to acquire technological competencies that are increasingly important in contemporary societies. In this sense, digital technologies can function as mechanisms of social inclusion by providing children with opportunities that support their future integration into mainstream social and economic life.

However, the study also highlights that the use of digital technologies within institutional settings raises several ethical concerns. Children living in institutional care are often considered a particularly vulnerable group, and their engagement with digital spaces must therefore be guided by strong ethical safeguards. Risks such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful online content, privacy violations and online exploitation remain significant challenges. Without appropriate supervision and digital literacy education, children may find it difficult to navigate digital environments safely.

Institutional authorities and caregivers therefore play an essential role in regulating children's digital engagement. Clear institutional guidelines regarding internet use, access to digital devices and online safety are necessary to ensure that digital participation remains beneficial

rather than harmful. Training programs that enhance digital literacy among both children and caregivers can also contribute to safer digital practices within institutional environments.

Another important dimension emerging from the discussion relates to issues of digital inequality. While digital technologies have the potential to enhance children's opportunities, access to these technologies is often uneven across institutions. Some child care institutions may have adequate infrastructure, digital devices and internet connectivity, while others may lack such resources due to financial or administrative limitations. This unequal distribution of technological resources can create disparities in learning opportunities and digital exposure among children living in different institutional settings.

The discussion also highlights the importance of considering cultural sustainability within institutional care environments. Children growing up in institutional homes often experience disruptions in their relationships with family networks, community traditions and cultural practices. Such disruptions may affect their sense of identity and belonging. In this context, digital technologies can either strengthen or weaken children's cultural connections.

On the one hand, digital platforms may allow children to access cultural knowledge, regional languages and traditional practices through online media, educational videos and cultural content. Digital storytelling, language learning applications and cultural archives may help children remain connected with their cultural heritage. On the other hand, unregulated exposure to global digital culture may lead to the marginalization of local traditions and values. Institutional environments must therefore create a balance between digital engagement and opportunities for cultural participation.

In the context of Punjab, cultural identity is closely associated with language, regional traditions and community values. Child care institutions can play an important role in promoting cultural continuity by integrating cultural activities, festivals and community engagement alongside digital learning opportunities.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that digital technologies are neither inherently beneficial nor harmful for children in institutional care. Their impact depends largely on how institutions manage digital access, provide supervision and promote responsible digital practices. When used in ethically guided and child-centred ways, digital technologies can support children's educational development, social inclusion and cultural connection.

However, without proper regulation and institutional responsibility, these technologies may also expose vulnerable children to new forms of risk and inequality.

Therefore, the integration of digital technologies within institutional care systems must be accompanied by clear ethical guidelines, digital literacy programs and policy frameworks that prioritize children's rights and well-being.

8. Conclusion

The expansion of digital technologies has brought significant transformations in contemporary societies, influencing the ways individuals learn, communicate and interact with social institutions. For children living in institutional care, these technological developments present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital platforms can provide valuable educational resources, facilitate communication and enable access to information that may otherwise remain limited within institutional environments. Digital learning tools, online educational platforms and communication technologies can contribute to children's academic development, digital literacy and future employability.

At the same time, the increasing presence of digital technologies in institutional settings also raises important ethical and practical concerns. Issues such as online safety, privacy protection, exposure to harmful digital content and unequal access to technological resources require careful attention. Children living in institutional homes may be particularly vulnerable to such risks due to limited supervision, varying levels of digital literacy and differences in institutional infrastructure. Therefore, it becomes essential for child care institutions to adopt responsible strategies that ensure safe and meaningful engagement with digital technologies.

Within the framework of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, child care institutions carry a crucial responsibility to safeguard the rights and well-being of children in their care. Institutional authorities, caregivers and policymakers must work collectively to develop guidelines and practices that regulate children's use of digital technologies in ways that promote their development while minimizing potential risks. Digital literacy education, ethical supervision and clear institutional policies can play an important role in supporting responsible digital engagement.

In the context of Punjab, the responsible integration of digital technologies within institutional care systems has the potential to enhance children's educational opportunities, social inclusion

and cultural sustainability. At the same time, institutional environments must ensure that digital engagement does not weaken children's connection to their cultural identities, social values and community networks. Balanced approaches that combine technological access with cultural participation and social support can contribute to children's holistic development.

Ultimately, the effective use of digital technologies in institutional care requires a child-centred and ethically informed approach that prioritizes children's rights, safety and well-being. By integrating responsible digital practices within child welfare systems, institutions can help create supportive environments that prepare children for meaningful participation in an increasingly digital society while also strengthening their long-term social integration and personal development.

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