

Contemporary Gurus in Indian Classrooms: Changing Professorial Authority and Cultural Tensions in Managing Digital Connectivity

UTTARAN DUTTA
PAULINE HOPE CHEONG
ROBERT SHUTER
Arizona State University, USA

In an environment of increasing digitalization and hyperconnectivity among Indian youths, this article examines the communication practices of professorial authority and the cultural tensions negotiated by college instructors as they intervene to manage digital connectivity and distractions in the Indian academe. Findings from interviews with 66 Indian professors illustrate how they communicate their authority using distinctive practices such as discursive norms, dialogic interactions, and verbal and nonverbal punishments. Furthermore, findings highlight how these instructors navigate cultural tensions as they face the dialectics of their status as privileged or disadvantaged and cultural similarities and differences in their management of their students' attention and learning in college classrooms. The results of this study contribute to deepening insights on instructional and intercultural communication as well as broadening understanding of cross-cultural similarities and differences in teacher-student interactions in mediated learning environments.

Keywords: *Indian classroom, hyperconnectivity, authority of instructors/gurus, intercultural communication dialectics, instructional communication*

Background

Rising Internet Connectivity in India: The Digital and Digitally Distracted

Nomophobia is a term describing a growing fear in today's world—the fear of being without a mobile device, or beyond mobile phone contact. Among today's high school and college students, it's on the rise. (Elmore, 2014, para. 1)

Uttaran Dutta: Uttaran.Dutta@asu.edu
Pauline Hope Cheong: Pauline.Cheong@asu.edu
Robert Shuter: Robert.Shuter@asu.edu
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Students can't resist distraction for two minutes . . . and neither can you. Are gadgets making us dumber? . . . Some students, even when on their best behavior, can't concentrate on homework for more than two minutes without distracting themselves by using social media or writing an email. (Sullivan, 2013, para. 1)

Striking news headlines and stories like the ones above typify a growing body of commentary that highlights the links between college students' hyperconnectivity and the challenges of digital media immersion and distractions. This article examines the communication practices of professorial authority and the cultural tensions negotiated by college instructors as they intervene to manage digital connectivity and distractions in the Indian academe. While communication studies have examined data related to rising technology and mobile phone use in India (e.g., Rao & Desai, 2008; Shuter, Dutta, Cheong, Chen, & Shuter, 2018; B. Singh, Gupta, & Garg, 2013), little research has explored how instructors perform their authority in Indian college classrooms in the midst of students' hyperconnectivity. Yet India is a highly significant context to investigate communication interventions and the complexities in classroom management, particularly the implications of cultural tensions or dialectics in communication (Cheong, Martin, & Macfadyen, 2012; Martin & Nakayama, 2010) for instruction and pedagogy in higher education. The dialectical approach, a perspective for understanding human communication, urges us to bypass simplistic stereotypes about culture and hold two apparently contradictory ideas and/or cultural interactions and tensions simultaneously (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

India, with a vast online population of more than 462 million (Internet World Statistics, 2016), has seen an exponential growth in mobile telephony. The subscriber base increased more than 10 times in just one decade: from 90.14 million in fiscal year 2005–2006 to more than 1 billion in fiscal year 2015–2016 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2006, 2016). Among Indian Internet users, 46% belong to the 13–24 age group—or mostly students from middle school to university. With more than 33 million students enrolled in higher education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015), the college student population in India is one of the biggest in the world. Moreover, the largest number of future college students will come from India. Pervasive in the lives of these students is the influential role of digital connectivity and applications, which has significant implications for their everyday lives and learning experiences.

Indian youths bring new meaning to the notion of digital connectivity; some consider their digital devices to be so integral to their lives that they describe them as one of their "body organs" (Kamble, 2015). Scholars have also pointed out that many Indian students suffer from "nomophobia" (or no-mobile-phone phobia), FOMO (fear of missing out), and FOBO (fear of being off-line) as they experience anxiety and/or panic when they are separated from their digital devices (Agrawal, Sahana, & De, 2016; B. Singh et al., 2013). Recent research on classroom distraction suggests that Indian students send and read messages/texts via social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp as well as frequently check their phones to read push notifications and to respond to the messages on an immediate basis (Agrawal et al., 2016).

Such striking inseparability between Indian young adults and their digital devices has prompted several commentators to observe that the hyperconnectivity of college students is affecting their learning

behaviors in the classroom. Vorderer and Hastall (2009) noted that Indian students frequently practice off-tasking while attending classes in colleges and universities. D'Souza (2011) highlighted that, because Indian students are wedded to their digital devices and use them intensely, they are "prone to being distracted" (p. 267) in the classroom. Recent survey research among 376 Indian undergraduates finds that most of the students agreed that digital distractions limited the degree and quality of pedagogy and participation in classrooms (Shuter et al., 2018). In this article, the present-day digital distractions in the Indian classroom refer to disruptive mobile phone ringing, attending to notifications and instant messaging, and diversions such as social media use for off-task and recreational purposes.

In light of such intense digital connectivity among Indian students, research needs to attend to the practices of educators and administrators and the role of public institutions in managing students' experiences of digital technologies and communal learning activities with digital resources (Selwyn, 2009). Experimental studies on multitasking demonstrate how digitally enabled off-task behaviors impair students' and their peers' comprehension of lecture material (Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013) and retention of lecture content (Hembrooke & Gay, 2003). Students' mobile phone usage involving texting and sending tweets unrelated to class content negatively affects their note taking, recall of information, and performance on tests (Kuznekoff, Munz, & Titsworth, 2015). Importantly, students' digital engagement affects their instructors' pedagogy and classroom communication, as Indian faculty members have identified digital devices as a source of distraction during class time as well as a potential source of stress among teachers (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2014).

Yet there is less systematic understanding of how instructors view digital distractions and communicate their authority amid various opportunities and challenges to manage their class in distinctive cultural contexts. Thus, the emerging phenomenon of digital hyperconnectivity and distractions is worthy of empirical research, with significant implications for understanding cultural tensions in India as well as teacher-student communication, classroom management, and higher education learning outcomes writ large.

Managing Digital Distractions: Communication Practices and Perspectives

Recent studies on changing classroom dynamics and digital disruptions in the American academe have discussed banning digital devices from the classroom (Goundar, 2014) and the need for instructors to communicate the rationale behind their encouragement or discouragement of the use of digital devices in class (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013). Findings from a recent study drawing on in-depth interviews with American professors found that they enact their classroom authority beyond a simple ban on digital devices in class. They embrace distinct communication strategies such as using printed and verbal enforcement of codified rules in course syllabi, redirecting students' attention via prompts and using social media in class activities, and doling out personal reprimands and sanctions as well as deflecting the issue (Cheong, Shuter, & Suwinyattichaiporn, 2016).

Postcolonial India, particularly in the recent globalized era, has experienced major changes in terms of cultural values as well as the introduction of newer modes of communication in an environment of rapid technological innovations. Such new mediated dynamics have influenced the perceptions and

behaviors of academic stakeholders (Bhaskar, 2014). Within Indian higher education, Shrivastava and Shrivastava (2014) noted that a few colleges have specific guidelines to limit digital usage in classrooms, but many institutions are not so restrictive. Several scholars have further argued that Indian teachers need to embrace newer and technology-driven pedagogical strategies to make learning more engaging and interactive (Kapur & Sharma, 2013). On the other hand, R. Singh (2016) noted that Indian students should conform to a code of digital ethics to ensure individuality and privacy in academic spaces. However, in the Indian context, such recommendations may not be easy to enact in light of various cultural complexities and tensions affecting classroom communication and management. This prompts us to think dialectically about culture and instructor authority, as discussed in the next section.

Cultural Dialectics in the Communication of Instructor Authority

Several cultural tensions or dialectics mark the practices of Indian instructors as they constitute their authority in the classroom. A dialectical perspective recognizes the interdependent and complementary aspects of seeming opposites and highlights the dynamic character of culture as well as our knowledge about cultures and communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). In the context of Indian college classrooms, it is proposed that at least two key cultural dialectics are operant: the privilege-disadvantage dialectic and the similarities-differences dialectic.

The Privilege-Disadvantage Dialectic

Instructors carry and communicate various types of privilege and disadvantage in terms of their social position and status. Some professors may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged in mediated classrooms. Historically, the Indian education system was based upon the *guru-shisya parampara* (teacher-student tradition), where gurus were revered as gods and teachers are worshiped by their pupils. Later, during the colonial era, a centralized and standardized education system was introduced by the rulers embracing Eurocentric pedagogy (Langohr, 2005). Despite several changes in the Indian academic landscape over the years, high power distance and authoritarianism were observed and practiced in the spaces of academia, where teachers often “control the intellectual program and tend to initiate and control communication” (Roach, Cornett-DeVito, & DeVito, 2005, p. 89). Scholars have also noted that Indian university students tend to follow professors’ authorities as well as “custom-bound, hierarchized, and heteronomous” (Suri, 2004, p. 13) academic systems, which often made them recipients of knowledge rather than co-creators of knowledge (K. Kumar, 1991).

On the other hand, Altbach (2009) has noted that Indian “academic institutions at all levels are subject to extraordinary bureaucratic controls, often imposed by [the] government” (p. 16). In a centralized education system like this, teachers are invisible in the decision-making process—for example, in designing a curriculum and developing policies (Batra, 2009; Clarke, 2003); such limited autonomy has implications for teachers’ classroom management and assessment practices.

Furthermore, changing behaviors of student communities, such as active participation of students in protests, has made the work of Indian teachers more complex (Chakraborty, 2016). Embracing the changing values catalyzed by digital media, some Indian students increasingly want their voices heard in

the classroom and expect more equal status with their instructors (Shuter et al., 2018). In addition, in recent years, teachers face various threats and interferences from local politicians, which has implications for the instructors' autonomy and authority (Cheney, Ruzzi, & Muralidharan, 2005). As such, Indian professors' classroom communication and management may be hindered as they are sandwiched between pressures exerted by their higher authorities (legislative/political and bureaucratic) and their students.

The Similarities-Differences Dialectic

Instructors' communication practices also reflect how cultural similarities and differences can coexist and affect their relationships with their students. The similarities-differences dialectic underscores the importance of not overemphasizing group differences or similarities such that it erects false dichotomies and rigid expectations about cultures (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). These rigid cultural expectations include classroom cultures and have been characterized as either collectivistic or individualistic (Hofstede, 1991). The "I" consciousness is valued in individualistic contexts, alongside an individual's identity, initiative, and achievement. Conversely, in the "we" consciousness in collectivistic culture, identity is based on respect for group identity, bonds, and progress (Hofstede, 1991). Yet there are historical and emerging tensions related to cultural similarities and differences in individualistic and collectivistic values that can shape how and when educators and students recognize classroom impropriety and handle digital disruptions (Campbell, 2008).

On one hand, some scholars have noted that the Indian culture is vertical-collectivist, where individuals conform to institutional and social norms and expect social inequity and hierarchy (Sivadas, Bruvold, & Nelson, 2008). In the Indian classroom, vertical collectivism is historically expressed by unquestioning conformity to a traditional power hierarchy and value system (*parampara*). On the other hand, recent changes such as (a) independent and affordable access to digital resources that instills an individual orientation as well as (b) the availability of reliable and affordable "suggested" questions and answers for end-of-term exams often reduce students' dependence on classroom instruction to succeed. Scholars have also noted how the authority practices of Indian professors are changing and being challenged by new cultural mores that value different aspects of individualism and collectivism. As R. Kumar and Worm (2004) have noted, "while Indians may be collectivistic, this collectivism goes hand-in-hand with a strong individualistic streak" (p. 313). Therefore, Indian students' and teachers' culture-sensitive responses to meaningful attention in the classroom are contingent upon how they interpret different stimuli, particularly in evaluating personal and group conflicts as well as in making sense of self and community. As Campbell (2008) has found, those with collectivist orientations differ from those with individualistic orientations in terms of how they perceive mobile phone distractions as a source of conflict for their group harmony and goals. Accordingly, in the context of broader debates about changing power and a crisis of legitimacy faced by established authorities and educational institutions (Pace & Hemmings, 2007), it is imperative that we understand how college instructors communicate their authority in the classroom in the context of students' hyperconnectivity and digital distractions. Specifically, thinking dialectically about culture and instructional communication in the Indian context also prompts us to investigate how Indian professors navigate cultural tensions that they encounter as they manage their classes. Hence, in this article, we explore three research questions:

- RQ1: How do professors in India view students' off-task use of communication technologies in class?*
- RQ2: By what means do Indian professors communicate their authority to manage digital distractions in the classroom?*
- RQ3: In what ways do professors negotiate the cultural tensions they face in their classroom management?*

Method

Data Collection

This article is based on interviews with 66 instructors affiliated with five urban universities in eastern India. The study draws upon data from a larger multimethod study on more than 2,000 students and professors from the United States, Denmark, India, Hong Kong, and China. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between May and July 2014. The interviews were conducted at a place of the instructors' choice. Sixty interviews took place at the instructors' university offices and six took place at their home offices. The interviews lasted from 20 to 55 minutes and were conducted primarily in English (in some instances, interviewees used Hindi and Bengali).

Interviewees were selected from a nonprobability sample of researchers' contacts, and they were recruited via phone and e-mail invitations after institutional review board approvals were secured in researchers' universities. The sample was drawn to ensure maximum variation in terms of gender, rank, and disciplines. Thirty-two instructors interviewed are men, and 34 are women. All instructors interviewed are full-time faculty members, from 14 disciplines, with 58% of them in senior or full professor positions. On average, interviewees have taught 19 years in their respective academic institutions and report that their class sizes range from 35 to 70 students. All the interviewees who participated in this research are employees of government-run or -aided academic institutions, most of which have experienced recent student agitations and political/bureaucratic interventions. Sixty-nine percent of the participants have a social media profile, and 12 of them use social media to share documents and resources with their students.

We conducted semistructured interviews to understand various aspects of instructor perceptions and management of digital distractions, including (a) instructors' thoughts on classroom use of technology and their implications for student distraction and learning (e.g., "Have you encountered any issues within the classroom concerning inappropriate or distracting Internet and technology use among students?" and "How do you manage these problems and issues?") and (b) the effectiveness of their pedagogical and classroom management strategies and the changing perceptions of their authority (e.g., "Do you think the use of the Internet and other digital technologies has impacted the way college professors do their everyday work?" and "Compared to the past [in reference to when they started teaching, e.g., 10 to 20 years ago], do you think that your authority as a college professor has changed in any way?").

Data Analysis

All the interviews were fully transcribed, and conversations in local languages were translated into English. The transcription process took more than a year because most of the participants had a thick south Asian accent and sometimes spoke in south Asian languages such as Bengali and Hindi. To ensure the authenticity of the transcripts, scholars from south Asia were consulted, which made the transcription process (along with some translation work) time-intensive. The grounded theory method was used to analyze the articulations of faculty members, and, accordingly, we employed the constant comparison technique, in which interview data are compared and contrasted to derive theoretical inferences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Open, axial, and selective coding processes were systematically used to study the articulations carefully (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and answer all three research questions. First, to identify and categorize discrete concepts using open coding processes, transcribed texts were examined sentence by sentence, which enabled us to group related and similar phenomena under conceptual categories. Next, in the axial coding phase, the relationships within and among the categories were deduced. Finally, the determination of core categories and subsequent theoretical integration were achieved in the selective coding phase.

Through a constant comparative methodology, development, clarification, and enhancement of the categories of instructors' narratives continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Once the codes were derived, they were brought back to four faculty participants to learn whether the codes made sense to them. After member checking, final categories were reviewed to assure the quality and verification of the interpretations presented (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Such categorization, driven by our conceptual questions, ensured that quotations selected to represent instructors' viewpoints reflect convergence and consistency of opinions voiced by the interviewees (Charmez, 2006). Consequently, this in-depth and systematic analysis of faculty narratives enriches our insights into instructors' experiences and perceptions as it seeks to comprehend the communicative practices constituting professorial authority and its challenges within specific cultural contexts (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003).

Results

Instructors' Perceptions of Students' Off-Task Use of Communication Technologies

Instructors' perceptions of digital distractions varied in terms of both degree and kind. About three-fourths of the interviewees said that digital distractions negatively influenced classroom education. They perceive such distracting behaviors as significant instructional challenges because they affect not only their students' performance but also their pedagogical attitudes and activities. For instance, a senior philosophy professor commented,

Yes, now it's quite frequent for the last . . . say, three to four years. We can see students using mobile phones in class; it becomes distracting for those students, other students as well as for me. Yes, it is irritating when you find that some students are using some technology and not listening to the lecture. I feel personally very humiliated

if the students are not paying attention. I find that there is a lot more distraction now and very little attention span.

More than one-third of the faculty members expressed serious concerns about managing digital distractions and four-fifths of them commented on the negative impact that digital distractions have on their students and peers. According to one professor from the English department,

In almost every class I find some students who do not listen to what I am saying, but they all concentrate on their mobile phones. Usually the students using the laptops or the smart phones [are] hooked on to it, and he or she is almost cut off from the rest of the class.

A few instructors mentioned that distractions prompted by students' use of digital technologies are new but not substantially different from prior classroom distractions. For example, one professor from the biology department said, "Distraction is eternal . . . [those] who earlier used to sit in the last bench and look outside the window [are] now looking at the window of the mobile phone."

Many Indian professors expressed that digital distractions are on the rise and are adversely impacting in-class learning experiences, so they discourage off-tasking behaviors in classrooms. Close to half of the interviewees specifically mentioned that they thought students' engagement in recreational and off-task social media use would adversely affect other students as well as disrupt the flow of their class. In the words of a senior economics professor,

When students use digital devices, it's a very subtle kind of contagious distraction . . . in the sense that your mind is taken away from what is happening in the class to what somebody sitting next to you is doing. You will be inquisitive.

Professors also expressed their concerns about the magnitude of digital distractions and the impossibility of constant monitoring. One professor from the geography department said,

Suppose I am teaching some new topic and if some student is using his or her laptop for other purposes, then I cannot [monitor] all the time, notice what he or she is doing. In that sense, we do not encourage them to use laptops during classes.

Communication Strategies to Manage In-Class Digital Distractions

Faculty members took various approaches to communicate their authority to manage in-class digital distractions. Three key strategies emerged in the interviews: discursive norms, dialogic interactions, and verbal and nonverbal punishments.

Discursive Norms

Nearly one-third of the interviewees said that they issue clear verbal warnings about digital distractions and the misuses of technology in class at the beginning of each semester or session. These warnings act as a preemptive measure to avert disruptive behaviors; for example, they remind students of the consequences of misusing their communication devices or prompt students to switch off their phones or put them on silent mode. One anthropology professor said, "I generally tell the students not to use mobile phones in the class. I always tell them that if you use such types of [digital] gadgets or things, then you will be given negative grades."

Fourteen professors said that they often communicate their expectations for proper classroom etiquette at the start of a course to encourage students to behave more responsibly in their classes. Such communications are primarily oral in nature because, unlike their Western counterparts, faculty members of Indian universities do not have autonomous control over their course syllabus design and rules. One history professor said,

The first time I meet my students, I make it clear to them: keep the phones in silent or switched-off mode. I think these students themselves are mature enough; they are not children that I have to keep on reminding them. I think they have the sense that they are in a class and they are responsible for their actions.

The use of discursive norms, typically early in the course to shape students' attentional practices, also included instructions on the appropriate use of communication technologies in class. Several instructors mentioned that they discuss the "dos and don'ts" of the use of digital devices in class. According to one economics professor, for example, technology use in class is designated for specific tasks under direct supervision:

I believe we do not have any policy or written document as such, but we have set up as a convention that we do not use [the] Internet in class, except for academic purposes. I will give you an instance, when I teach this applied economics course, often I use the Internet to transfer data sheets to my class students who use it [sheets] in the practical class.

In addition, 19 faculty members said that they initiate meaningful conversations to persuasively present and discuss the issue of Internet propriety and digital distractions to help their students gain an understanding of the issue from their point of view. One of the interviewees affiliated with the English department said,

I do not believe in punishments. Because all are adults, so there is no need to punish; but sometimes I try to make them see a teacher's point of view. If a teacher is putting all her efforts in teaching and the student is busy chatting over the phone or sending texts, so I make the students see the teacher's point of view.

To build and reclaim professorial authority, instructors elicit student compliance by communicating appropriate learning norms as well as establishing values that support a respectful classroom environment to keep digital distractions to a minimum.

Engaged Classroom Discussions

Several instructors said that they endeavor to cultivate and redirect their students' attention to classroom learning activities as a strategy for managing distractions; in doing so, they often adopt active classroom discussions as a basis for their pedagogy. About one-fifth of the faculty members said they design their curriculum to stress active classroom discussions. They initiate dialogues to create better connections with their students, thereby attempting to manage digital distractions that have been recently linked to students' experiencing "boredom" in the classroom (McCoy, 2016). According to one sociology professor,

I believe if the topic which is being discussed in the class is very interesting, all of the students, not only the good students, will be reluctant to chat with the outside. On the other hand, if the topic or the teaching style is boring, then automatically students will also feel bored, and then distracting activities increase. Thus, controlling distractions has to do with holding the attention of the students. I try to make my lessons as simple as possible; also by giving examples from everyday life I try to create interactions, and thereby capture their attention.

A mathematics professor said that he tries to engage students' attention in class with problem-based learning, particularly using math problems that involve mathematical optimization, which involves dialogic interaction to help students select the solution from a set of alternatives. He said, "Most of the time I want them to be involved in the classroom by giving them some numerical problems of an assignment inside the classroom so that is how they are actually involved [in decision making] inside the classroom."

Professors interviewed also said that they strive to make their lessons interesting to students and ask their students to give examples to hold their attention. To make their lessons compelling, instructors said they stress the practical applicability of class material and use "joyful comments." This is done sometimes by using local languages to explain topics better and facilitate more engaging in-class activities. One film studies professor said,

Embracing dialogic mode of communication, if you involve students in discussion, then it is possible to keep the students engaged in classrooms. In addition, sometimes I have to explain certain things in local languages such as Hindi and Bengali so that they understand better.

Furthermore, professorial authority is maintained by integrating the opportune use of technology in course work to boost classroom participation. Several professors reported purposefully fusing their lesson plans with newer classroom technologies and digital applications to capture students' interest and

promote engagement. For instance, a sociology professor said, "There is always a kind of interaction. I use slides to capture their attention or show them movies." The strategic use of technology also extends to the deft incorporation of students' online interactions into classroom discussions. For instance, three professors said that if they notice that their students are digitally distracted, they openly ask students to explain their behaviors or provide justifications for their engagement with online texts in order to steer any divergent practices back to class work. One professor from the engineering school said, "Even if I catch someone, I don't throw them out of the class, but I might ask them to . . . let's say . . . if you're reading something, let's share it with the whole class, what is there [that is] so interesting?"

Several participants also mentioned their use of social media spaces to promote engaged discussions among students. One-third of the professors reported that they accept friend requests from their students. One sociology professor explained,

I think when it comes to technology; you can communicate with your students by sharing online material and getting it circulated. In many of the courses, including one that I am teaching now, we have a Facebook group. I upload links or even PDF files of essays, which I think they should read . . . and things like that. So, I mean, I do expect all of them to be members of that group. More than 65% of my friends are my students.

Hence, through an emphasis on active classroom interactions, Indian professors promote a classroom culture that supports teacher immediacy to cultivate an atmosphere that is not conducive to tuning out and to off-purpose technology use.

Verbal and Nonverbal Punishments

About one-fifth of the professors enact penalties and punishments to manage digital distractions. A few professors said that they publicly castigate students who disrupt their class, primarily to reprimand students for their distracting demeanor and to modify future classroom behaviors. For example, one physics instructor stated, "If they get out of line, I yell . . . that's for the morale of class, I yell. So if you do it a few times, the word gets around so people don't do it [and get digitally distracted]."

Other professors discussed strict punitive measures they take to address digital distractions, including the confiscation of students' digital devices and temporary suspensions from class. For example, one senior biology professor said,

During class, we confiscate the phone and gadgets and let the student go. During examinations, we detain the students for 20 to 30 minutes so that they can't write anything in [their] answer script, and we also seize the devices temporarily.

Another form of classroom management of digital distractions involves the physical removal of offending students from the classroom. One professor from the sociology department said,

I have suspended students previously, particularly them, who were serial offenders. In one such incident . . . two students were creating distractions in the class, and I told them not to do it several times. . . . Finally, I said, "You guys, out of class; don't come back in two weeks," and I made sure they didn't come back in two weeks.

At times, classroom punishments are meted out in both verbal and nonverbal forms, illustrated in the following statement:

I tend to interrupt them or maybe I change their places. . . . [In] certain instances, I also had to take their laptops and mobiles and keep it at [the] side with me so that they can concentrate on their studies and not play with the laptop and mobiles.

Instructors' Negotiation of Cultural Tensions in Managing Digital Distractions

As a way of explaining their classroom communication practices and developments, responses from instructors highlight countervailing tensions in the management of digital distractions. While instructors seek to communicate their authority and build credibility with their college students, they face critical opportunities and challenges that are embedded in sociocultural expectations and institutional contexts. Here we discuss how instructors negotiate these cultural tensions in terms of their privilege-disadvantage and cultural similarities-differences dialectics in performing and restructuring their classroom communication practices.

As discussed, professors in India are traditionally revered and ascribed high social status. Yet the dynamics in teacher-student relationships are changing, mainly due to increasing global exposure and the emergence of newer value systems in academia. More than half of the faculty members interviewed mentioned their concerns about changes in instructional interactions—particularly how the degree of respect for teachers has decreased. In the words of a senior history professor,

In the Indian context, we are noticing changes in the value system. Earlier teachers were revered as gurus, as someone . . . superior. Students used to pay a lot of respect to them. Now the approach is changing. Now students can approach the teacher as a senior individual who can be befriended. The overall impression that I get from the students is that they have started respecting their professors . . . less.

However, nearly one-third of the participants also expressed skepticism about the traditional hierarchy in Indian academia, because they prefer to work toward more open and horizontal relationships with their students. One instructor from the Bengali (language) department said,

Contemporary student-teacher interactions are very likely to be different, and I don't think it affects the unit of respect in any way; it has become more open, more informal, and friendlier even. That's just a change in time and I respect that.

For many interviewees, the communication of their authority to manage digital distractions is bounded within changes in culture—in particular, the narrowing of the hierarchy between instructors and students as reflected in institutional rules and increasingly vociferous students' demands that are expressed through petitions and strikes.

Notably, eight university professors said that they have tried to implement restrictions on digital usage, including imposing bans on mobile devices. Because of student opposition, however, such university-wide measures could not be implemented. Instead, faculty members manage their classes by communicating their norms and expectations. In the words of one chemistry professor,

Once we tried to impose a ban . . . use of mobile phones not allowed in the classroom. What happened after that is . . . we got a long letter signed by all students by saying that we are taking a huge step backward because they use mobile phones, sometimes to record the teachers' lectures, sometimes to go online and double-check certain facts. In other words, students claimed that they are always using it for academic purpose; so why do we want to deny them this privilege? Afterwards, we had to withdraw that order, and we could not enforce it. Actually, in college and university level, it would be too much to impose bans on laptops or smart phones, especially in the classroom; we can only request the students to keep the phone in the silent mode. That's the maximum we can do.

In addition, several interviewees reported that their university administrators have been reluctant to help or support their management of in-class digital distractions. A sociology professor shared her experience: "I discussed the matter with the head of the department, and he didn't take digital distractions very seriously and he advised me that there is nothing we can do about distractive behaviors." Three professors also expressed concerns about the role of media in covering campus news such as student strikes to the public; they noted that such mediation made their job difficult and stressful, particularly in enforcing classroom discipline. Seven faculty members said that they felt powerless to some extent, because it is not possible to regulate student behavior after a certain point to avoid larger consequences. One of the interviewees affiliated with the statistics department commented,

[The] fear factor has gone out of the students. They know that up to a point they can be punished, but not beyond that. So by and large, we are not following strict rules. This is primarily because of harsh consequences—say, media attention. Moreover, students' unions are very powerful. So we tend to forget or ignore things to some extent.

Four professors even said that some recalcitrant students brazenly use their devices and do not care about classroom etiquette or discipline. A professor from the English department reported,

There is one tendency that is growing by the day: the students are not at all afraid of using digital devices. Even if they are up to some mischief, they are totally confident about what they are doing, and they don't try to hide the devices from teachers.

Second, responses from instructors highlight how cultural similarities and differences—particularly negotiating tendencies toward individualism and collectivism—shape when and how they handle digital disruptions. For instance, some professors are more tolerant of students' digital distractions and are more hesitant to address the issue as they focus more on collective goals and their class's progress. One biology professor said, "I don't actually try to tackle these problems. The best we can do is give them a warning, which is, of course, very infrequent. Otherwise we let the flow of lecture [be] interrupted." To avoid discord or conflict, some professors do not intervene with "students who choose to sit in the back bench so that they can do something when they are distracted or they don't want to pay attention to the class." Other professors are less intentional about their approach to digital distractions as they defer to institutional policy (e.g., "Well, it's not my policy but . . .") and rigorously conform to standardized protocols set by their university to regulate technology use.

Finally, a few professors recognize and capitalize on the individualistic bent of their students to help them police and restrain digitally disruptive behaviors. Some youths in India exhibit individualistic behaviors and proclivities to engage their digital gadgets constantly in classrooms without much regard for their peers' and instructors' well-being. Yet for many youths, their hyperconnected tendencies may be increasingly at odds with their dependence on their teacher's instruction for academic and career success. Five professors mentioned that the "self-motivation" and "commitment" of students determined to succeed in India's competitive colleges and workplaces can help them curtail frequent interruptions in class that disrupt their pedagogy. According to a professor in the engineering department,

Nowadays students are very much career oriented, especially for engineering students. They are interested to have the study materials to secure good grades in the examination. They understand their benefits, they understand their losses, and they are very competitive. They oftentimes tell their distracted classmates to stop digital activities for nonacademic purposes.

Discussion

With increasing digitalization, terms such as *nomophobia*, *FOBO*, and *FOMO* reflect the dependence of college students on a mélange of mobile technologies in their daily lives. As such, it is widely believed that digital distractions are a significant facet of contemporary learning environments. More than ever before, classroom communication needs to take into account digital media use as well as the management of digital distractions. At the same time, mediated interactions and learning opportunities in the classroom are not inseparable from the power of professors to intervene.

This article presents new theoretical and empirical insights on how instructors' comprehend their work and authority in the midst of their students' hyperconnectivity by innovatively addressing the nexus of technology and culture. By theoretically applying a dialectical approach, which recognizes that multiple and often contradictory meanings or tensions coexist in complex and dynamic cultural processes (Cheong et al., 2012; Martin & Nakayama, 2010), this article conceptualizes communication processes in managing digital distractions as profound and evolving, with multiple sociocultural pressures and conflicts. Through fieldwork in India that yields fresh empirical data on how contemporary gurus in Indian classrooms

perceive digital distractions and seek to manage them, the findings presented here enlighten how instructors communicate to construct their authority, and thereby endeavor to preserve their credibility and legitimacy in times of intense mediation. This article provides heuristic value to deepen our understanding of teacher-student interaction and to underscore critical opportunities, challenges, and countervailing tensions in digital engagement and classroom distractions in higher education.

Specifically, examining cultural dialectics in instructors' authority allows us to understand how instructors negotiate the tensions of seemingly opposite realities and challenging behavioral aspects of digital distraction as a part of their classroom communication. In the contemporary era, Indian academic stakeholders often simultaneously embrace individualist as well as collectivist values. Contextual realities such as an alarming rate of unemployment among educated Indian youths (approximately 15% according to a 2011 census; Rukmini, 2015) have also prompted a "meritocratic, competitive individualism" among college students (Rutherford, 2008). Therefore, while some faculty members are inclined to maintain the status quo in terms of a high power distance in the spaces of the academe, many professors acknowledge the emerging aspirations and values and therefore favor more open and horizontal relationships with their students. Accordingly, our study indicates that, although Indian instructors are, at some level, aware of their students' dual value orientations, they enact multiple practices to both manage and accommodate students' expectations and use of their mobile devices. For instance, in addressing the emerging dynamics and expectations in academia, many teachers are trying new practices such as participating in academic conversations via social media to make pedagogic experiences more engaged and accessible.

With the reduction of instructor authority in the Indian classroom, the faculty we interviewed appear to be affected by the privilege-disadvantage dialectic. That is, they seem to realize that, although historically Indian teachers were revered and, hence, privileged, times have changed, and Indian students prefer more equal relationships with their instructors. And with the centralization of power in the modern Indian university and with limited or no support from university administration, instructors have considerably less influence on important classroom and curricular policies, as indicated by our interviewees. As a result, Indian instructors are, in a way, trapped in academic ironies: damned if they do not control digital devices in their classrooms and damned if they do. That is, if they do not manage students' mobile devices, they fear that distractions will run amok, detrimentally affecting teaching and learning. And if they do closely monitor these devices, they risk student criticism—and even protests. Not surprisingly, many instructors in our study are not sure how to successfully manage mobile devices in their classrooms.

Furthermore, the ascendance of individualism among Indian university students seeks to preserve their personal freedom as well as collective voices in the classroom (Shuter et al., 2018). Some students openly conduct off-task behaviors without trying to hide this from their instructors, displaying what faculty refer to as "don't care" attitudes. These attitudes often disrupt pedagogical activities and the classroom environment. Ironically, the participation of university students in collective protest activities such as *gherao*, essentially meant to challenge authoritarianism and high power distances in Indian academia, also fuels individualism in the classroom, generating cultural tensions in the pedagogical landscape.

Interestingly, the classroom management challenges of Indian faculty revealed in this study are both similar to and different from how U.S. university faculty monitor mobile devices in their classrooms (Cheong et al., 2016). Like Indian faculty, there is no consensus among U.S. instructors about how to manage mobile devices in their classrooms, and, similar to their counterparts in India, they use a range of management tactics, including discursive norms and sanctions. However, unlike Indian faculty, the authority of U.S. instructors has not diminished significantly, and they still predominantly control their classrooms, formulating both curricular and classroom management policies, which are rarely practiced in Indian universities. Hence, while faculties in both India and the United States may use similar tactics to monitor mobile devices, they are constrained by different authority practices and cultural tensions.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This article presents self-reported responses from Indian faculty members from five urban universities. In future research, the geographical scope of the study could be broadened to include more universities located in various regions in India and south Asia to obtain a more holistic understanding of digitally distracted behavior and professorial authority in non-Western classrooms. Future research could also obtain data from university administrators to gather more diverse perspectives on classroom management and distraction issues. In addition, the inclusion of ethnographic research practices, such as classroom observations and recordings of in-class behaviors of students and teachers, could also enrich future research on this topic.

There is also a need for future cross-national research on how sociocultural factors may influence professors' strategies to manage and monitor mobile devices in their classrooms. Replicating our investigation with faculty in other traditional collectivistic societies is potentially valuable to ascertain whether the findings in this study are generalizable beyond India. Extending this line of research to instructors in various societies across the globe will help determine in what ways individualism, collectivism, and power hierarchy influence faculty management of digital devices, broadening our understanding of teaching and learning in increasingly mediated learning environments.

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