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The Double-Edged Web: Social Media Penetration and Cybercrime Exposure in India

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Abstract

Social media in India has emerged as a transformative tool for women's empowerment, particularly among middle-class and rural populations. This paper explores how digital platforms enable women to express themselves, pursue entrepreneurship, access education, and engage in activism, thus challenging traditional gender roles and societal norms. Drawing on secondary sources and recent studies, the paper highlights both the opportunities and challenges of this digital engagement. While platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp provide avenues for civic and political participation, they also expose women to risks such as cyberbullying, harassment, and cultural dissonance. The behavior of users ranging from urban mothers balancing modernity with tradition to conservative communities like

the Tablighi Jamaat adapting to digital norms demonstrates the complex interplay between culture and technology. Additionally, the rise in information-seeking and awareness around gender issues indicates a strong potential for broader societal change. However, barriers such as limited digital literacy and lack of time or interest hinder more active participation. This study argues for the importance of media literacy and inclusive digital policies to maximize the empowering potential of social media while mitigating its risks. By synthesizing diverse experiences and data, the paper offers a conceptual understanding of how digital platforms can catalyze gender equality and social transformation in India.

Keywords: Social Media, Women Empowerment, Cybercrime, Cyberbullying, Facebook

Introduction

Social media in India has become a transformative force for many middle-class women, offering them platforms for self-expression, entrepreneurship, and activism (Dash, n.d.)^[1]. This digital empowerment enables them to challenge traditional norms, participate in public discourse, and advocate for social change. However, this space is not without its challenges, as women are frequently subjected to cyberbullying, harassment, and privacy threats. Despite these risks, their persistent online presence underscores the need for robust safety measures to ensure a secure and inclusive digital environment.

The online behavior of middle-class Indian mothers is shaped not only by personal expression but also by cultural expectations and familial duties (Prabhakar & Maris, 2021)^[8]. Their engagement on social media represents a balance between modern digital practices and traditional values, reflecting broader societal norms. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have allowed women to become more active in civic and political arenas. Facebook, for instance, has played a significant role in encouraging political participation among Pakistani women, where online engagement often leads to offline political involvement (Shehzad *et al.*, 2021)^[10].

Social media also serves as a tool for education and professional development. Studies show that Indian women, particularly those in rural areas, prefer digital media—especially the Internet—for educational and occupational purposes, with radio being the least used medium (Nain, 2023)^[5]. This trend illustrates the growing importance of digital literacy in addressing gender disparities. However, these platforms are not without their cultural consequences. The influence of foreign content sometimes leads to a dilution of traditional values, particularly among educated rural women (Kumari S, 2021)^[11].

Digital technologies have created new avenues for women to achieve a better work-life balance, especially during the pandemic, when home-based work and entrepreneurship became more prevalent (Madhava, 2023) ^[4]. This digital flexibility has empowered women to juggle multiple roles effectively. Yet, their digital identities often serve as platforms for self-exploration and social performance, akin to Goffman's theory of social interaction, where online behavior mirrors theatrical performance.

In Temboro, East Java, women of the Tablighi Jamaat (JT) demonstrate how digital exposure can influence traditional communities. Despite JT's strict gender norms, these women increasingly participate in public life and social media, reflecting a negotiated adaptation of their religious teachings (Isnaini, S. 2022) ^[12]. This example illustrates how digital engagement can serve as a catalyst for evolving gender roles even in conservative settings.

Moreover, regional studies highlight specific trends. Tribal Naga women in Northeast India, for example, primarily use WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook for daily news consumption (Panmei & Meshack, 2024) ^[6]. This digital engagement has the potential to shift gender norms and reduce the acceptance of violence against women (VAW), particularly in resource-constrained environments. Viral content related to VAW illustrates how social media campaigns can lead to self-sustaining social change (Donati *et al.*, 2022) ^[2].

Despite the high reach of platforms like Instagram (76.5%) and Facebook (74.7%) and messaging apps like WhatsApp (79%), only a small portion (20%) of users actively express their opinions online (Rahul *et al.*, 2022) ^[9]. Barriers such as lack of knowledge (73.98%), interest (71.13%), and time (62.14%) contribute to this low engagement. Nonetheless, the high rate of information-seeking behavior (92.51%) and increased awareness around gender (97.16%) and civic issues (96.15%) suggest a strong potential for digital empowerment.

This paper aims to examine the role of social media in empowering women across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. It seeks to understand how digital engagement is reshaping traditional gender roles and societal expectations, enabling women to express themselves, participate in public discourse, and access economic and educational opportunities. Additionally, the paper analyzes the challenges women encounter in online environments, including cyber harassment, privacy threats, and the risk of cultural displacement due to the adoption of foreign influences. Finally, the study identifies and recommends effective strategies—such as promoting media literacy and implementing supportive policies—that can enhance the positive impact of social media while minimizing its associated risks. These objectives collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms can serve as powerful tools for women's empowerment and societal transformation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in secondary data sources to explore the dynamics of women's engagement with social media. Data will be collected from reputable online platforms and databases that offer insights into women's social media usage patterns across various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in India. These datasets will help frame a broad, data-driven picture of how

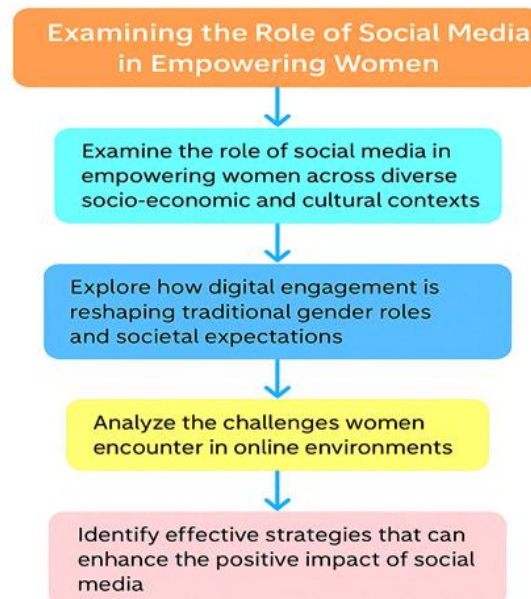
women utilize digital platforms for self-expression, education, work, and activism, as well as the challenges they face such as exposure to cyber threats and societal judgment.

Rather than conducting primary surveys, the research will rely on existing statistical datasets, government reports, and digital behavior studies to draw correlations and form hypothetical relationships aligned with the study's objectives.

This methodology will provide a macro-level understanding of social media's role in women's empowerment, grounded in verifiable, large-scale digital data.

Explanation

The conceptual model presented in the flowchart titled “Examining the Role of Social Media in Empowering Women” outlines a progressive framework through which the study approaches its core research objectives. At the foundation of the model is the examination of how social media empowers women across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts in India. This includes an analysis of different categories of women—urban and rural, educated and less-educated, secular and religiously conservative—and how their interactions with digital platforms vary in terms of access, participation, and outcomes. Building upon this foundation, the next stage of the model explores how digital engagement enables these women to challenge and reshape traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Social media becomes a space where women can redefine their identities, express personal or political opinions, and participate in discourse previously inaccessible to them.



Following this, the model recognizes that empowerment through digital platforms does not occur without friction. Therefore, it includes a critical analysis of the challenges women face in online environments, such as cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and social backlash—particularly in communities with strict cultural or religious norms. These risks highlight the dual nature of social media as both an empowering and potentially harmful space. Finally, the model concludes with the identification of effective strategies that can enhance the positive impact of social media on women's lives. These strategies include promoting

media literacy, strengthening online safety mechanisms, and implementing supportive policies to create inclusive and secure digital environments. This sequential framework allows the study to move from descriptive and diagnostic insights toward prescriptive recommendations, thereby contributing a well-rounded theoretical understanding of the dynamics between gender, society, and digital technology.

Current stats

At that time, 34.5 percent of India's social media user identities were female, while 65.5 percent were male. The user statistics you provided for India's most-used social media platforms in 2025—such as WhatsApp (531.46 million users), Instagram (516.92 million), Facebook (492.70 million), Telegram (384.06 million), and Facebook Messenger (343.92 million)—do not align with the figures reported in publicly available sources.

For instance, according to a 2025 report by Meltwater, WhatsApp is used by 80.8% of Indian internet users, Instagram by 77.9%, and Facebook by 67.8%. However, this report does not provide absolute user numbers.¹

Similarly, a 2025 article by Tekrevol states that India has over 650 million social media users, with WhatsApp dominating daily usage. Yet, it does not specify user counts for individual platforms.²

1.) Data from GSMA Intelligence shows that there were 1.12 billion cellular mobile connections in India at the beginning of 2025.

According to the report, 63.7% of the population aged 13 to 54—the working-age group—is using social media. This means that more than half of the population is active on these platforms. As this age group represents the demographic dividend, it is essential that social media be used positively for personal development and societal progress.

As of early 2025, YouTube had approximately 491 million users in India, reaching 33.7% of the total population and 60.9% of the country's internet users. While ad reach grew by 6.3% from 2024, it remained stable between October 2024 and January 2025. Among YouTube's adult ad audience, 34.5% were female and 65.5% male.³

As of early 2025, Facebook had an estimated 384 million users in India, with ad reach covering 26.3% of the total population and 47.6% of internet users. User growth rose by 4.5% year-on-year and 2.8% between October 2024 and January 2025. Of the ad audience, 26.4% were female and 73.6% male.⁴

As of early 2025, Instagram had approximately 414 million users in India, reaching 28.4% of the total population and 51.4% of internet users. User growth increased by 14% year-on-year and 5.8% quarterly. Among adult users, 29.2% were female and 70.8% male.⁵

¹ "Social Media Statistics for India" https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-india?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² Top Social Media Platforms by User Statistics 2025 "https://www.tekrevol.com/blogs/top-social-media-platforms-by-user-statistics/?utm_source=chatgpt.com"

³ "YouTube users in India in 2025, "YouTube user growth in India" <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-india>

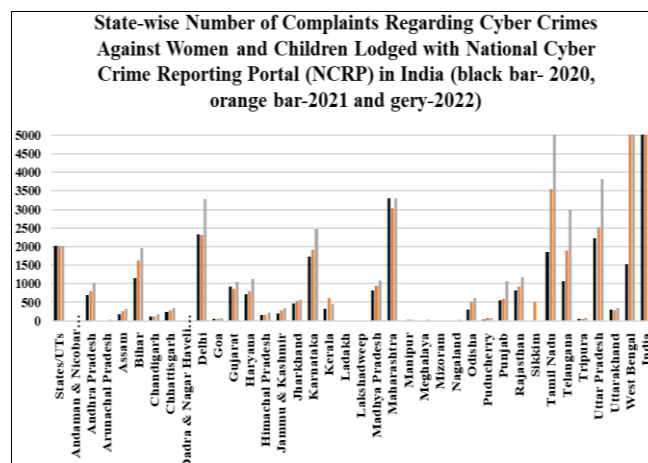
⁴ "Facebook users in India in 2025", "https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-india"

⁵ "Instagram users in India in 2025", <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-india>

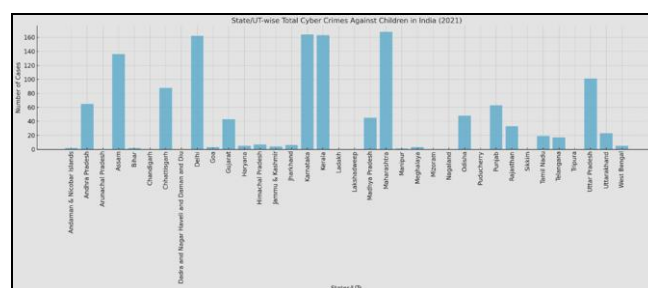
Social media usage

According to the 2024 Survey of Women Entrepreneurs in Low- & Middle-Income Countries Survey findings reveal that social media is a vital tool for women entrepreneurs in LMICs, with 89% using it daily. WhatsApp (94%) and Facebook (84%) are the most popular platforms for personal use, followed by Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and TikTok (46%). For business, 88% of women use WhatsApp, 74% use Facebook, and 53% use Instagram to market their ventures, indicating strong familiarity and strategic use of social media among women entrepreneurs.

Crime against



Source: Using the India stat



Source: Lok Sabha unstarred Questions No. 2837 dated on 17-03.2023.

The analysis of cyber-crimes against children in India for the year 2021 paints a deeply concerning picture, particularly with regard to the nature and concentration of offences. The data shows that cyber pornography, involving the hosting or circulation of obscene content featuring children, is the most dominant form of cybercrime, accounting for 969 out of 1,376 total cases—which is over 70% of all such crimes reported across the country. This clearly signals that online sexual exploitation of children is the most urgent and widespread digital threat, calling for immediate policy intervention and enforcement.

The distribution of cases across states also reveals stark regional disparities. States such as Maharashtra (168 cases), Karnataka (164), Kerala (163), Delhi (162), and Assam (136) lead the list, collectively contributing more than half of the total cybercrime cases against children. These high numbers could be attributed not only to greater digital access and higher urban population densities but also to relatively better cybercrime reporting systems in these states. On the other hand, several states and Union Territories—like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Sikkim,

Nagaland, Tripura, Ladakh, Puducherry, and Chandigarh—reported zero cases, which raises serious concerns about underreporting, lack of awareness, or insufficient digital policing infrastructure rather than a genuine absence of such crimes.

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India, reported 101 cases, with a majority falling under cyber pornography (73), followed by stalking/bullying (8), and other miscellaneous cyber offences (20). This distribution suggests that children in Uttar Pradesh are not only vulnerable to online sexual content but also face a broader range of emerging digital threats, some of which may not yet be clearly classified under existing legal categories.

While cyber stalking and bullying made up 123 cases (8.94%), the actual number could be much higher due to the underreporting caused by stigma or lack of awareness among children and their guardians. Similarly, cyber blackmailing, threats, or harassment, though serious in nature, were reported in only 23 cases (1.67%), suggesting a potential lack of detection mechanisms or cultural barriers in recognizing and reporting such offences. Fake profile crimes were relatively rare, at just 9 cases (0.65%), but are often tools for exploitation, deception, or grooming.

A noteworthy and somewhat puzzling detail is that not a single case was reported under the category of cybercrimes through online games, which have globally emerged as a growing medium for child exploitation. This zero reporting may point to misclassification, lack of specialized monitoring, or a gap in how such offences are recognized under Indian law.

The "Other Cyber Crimes" category, comprising 252 cases (18.31%), indicates that a significant share of threats does not fall within standard legal classifications, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of online abuse and the pressing need for modernized cybercrime legislation and tracking frameworks.

Conclusion

Social media in India presents a paradox of progress and vulnerability, particularly for women. While platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook have become powerful tools for entrepreneurship, education, and social participation, women remain underrepresented (34.5% of users) and disproportionately targeted by cybercrimes—from harassment to financial exploitation.

Yet, the transformative potential is undeniable: 89% of women entrepreneurs actively use these platforms for business growth, demonstrating how digital spaces can drive economic empowerment. The challenge lies in bridging the gender gap in access while combating rising online threats, especially in high-risk states like Maharashtra and Delhi, where reporting remains inconsistent.

To secure India's digital future, a balanced approach is crucial—one that combines stricter cybersecurity measures with digital literacy programs, gender-sensitive policies, and improved legal safeguards. By addressing both the opportunities and risks, India can transform social media into a truly inclusive force for empowerment, ensuring women and marginalized groups reap its benefits without fear. The path forward requires collaboration between policymakers, tech companies, and civil society to create a digital ecosystem that is as safe as it is revolutionary.

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