



SOCIAL MEDIA, GENDER, AND THE MARKET PLACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has positioned social media platforms as critical spaces where gender, identity, and economic participation intersect. This study examines how social media enables women to assert digital identities and participate in entrepreneurial and economic activities. Drawing on thematic and survey-based evidence, the research uncovers that social media functions as a space of both empowerment and negotiation for women. Respondents reported increased confidence, professional visibility, financial independence, and access to learning and networking opportunities. These findings align with global academic insights highlighting gendered platform preferences, algorithmic biases, and the commercialization of self-presentation online. However, the research also illuminates challenges such as emotional pressure, criticism management, cautious political expression, and mixed impacts on mental well-being. The study concludes that while social media significantly enables women's economic empowerment and marketplace participation, these digital opportunities are shaped by persistent gendered structures, platform bias, and socio-cultural negotiation. This duality highlights the need for more inclusive platform design, digital literacy frameworks, and policy support to strengthen women's equitable participation in the digital economy.

***Keywords:* Social media, women's empowerment, digital identity, digital entrepreneurship, gendered platforms, economic participation.**



INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the confluence of social media, gender and marketplace dynamics has created a rich terrain for both academic inquiry and practical implications.

Social media platforms mediate how individuals present themselves, how consumers discover and purchase goods, how marketers target audiences, and gender is a key dimension shaping all of these processes. Meanwhile, marketplace mechanisms (digital commerce, advertising, influencer marketing, algorithmic targeting) reflect and reinforce gendered patterns.

Social media is often assumed to be a relatively egalitarian or democratizing space, but gendered patterns of usage, representation and interaction remain salient. For example, one study of university students in Poland found statistically significant differences in platform-use patterns: women were more active on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok, Facebook Messenger, while men more often browsed/commented on YouTube, Twitter and Discord (Zdonek, 2021). The finding suggests that gender influences motivations and preferred platforms.

Another study examining activity planning and travel found that women were more influenced by photos/videos on social media in their decision processes than men (Karatsoli, 2020). Moreover, research on the U.S. social-network platform Twitter found that male and white users achieved higher positions in follower-counts and lists, illustrating that offline inequalities carry into online social structures (Messias, 2017).

Gender plays a crucial role in how individuals interact with and experience social media, leading to several key observations. Platform preference and usage motivations differ significantly by gender, where, for instance, women might lean toward relational functions and sharing, while men may prioritize informational or consultative usage (Krasnova, 2010). Furthermore, representation and engagement are asymmetric, highlighted by the prevalence of gendered content, issues of objectification, and follower asymmetries between genders (Nilizadeh, 2016). Ultimately, these dynamics reveal that social media is not a neutralizing force; it often replicates or transforms, rather than erases, existing offline gender inequalities (Tufekci, 2017).

Beyond consumer behaviour, the marketplace mechanism itself, by determining how ads are targeted, how products are priced and presented, can embed gendered biases. A striking recent study found that in the NFT marketplace, avatars identified as female were sold at ~37% lower prices than male avatars with similar attributes; likewise, black avatars were sold cheaper than white ones (Yuan, 2024).



These findings challenge the notion of a “neutral” digital marketplace. Instead, they suggest that technology may perpetuate existing inequalities, unless actively corrected through ethical design and policy. Social media also functions as a marketplace environment in its own right: discovery, shopping, social commerce, influencer-led purchase flows. A survey of global social-media shopping activities in 2023 found that women tend to discover new products via social media more frequently than men (Social Media Shopping Activities by Gender Worldwide, 2023). (Sharma, 2020) observed in an Indian context that male, female, and transgender millennials exhibited distinct social media marketing preferences, men favored Instagram advertising, women engaged more with blogs and videos, while transgender consumers displayed hybrid preferences. Such findings indicate that *social commerce* (shopping through social media) is not only technological but deeply social and gendered in nature.

The advent of social media has, without a doubt, created a profound, double-edged sword for women's lives, carving deep impacts across critical domains like mental health, nutritional habits, political engagement, and financial literacy. Take mental health, for instance: the relentless exposure to curated, idealized imagery and highly filtered narratives on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok isn't just a minor annoyance, it's a major driver of escalating anxiety, depression, and significant body image disturbances among female users, especially young adults (Merino, 2024). This isn't theoretical; a continuous, uncritical comparison to these impossibly perfect online personas actively erodes self-esteem and has been clearly linked in psychological studies to higher incidences of disordered eating and a distorted perception of reality (Hecht, 2024). In short, the algorithm often privileges aspiration over authenticity, and that relentless pursuit of an unattainable digital ideal is actively harming women's psychological well-being.

The intersection of social media, gender, and the marketplace creates a complex dynamic supported by academic research. Firstly, gendered self-presentation fuels consumption as platforms encourage self-branding and visual storytelling (Hearn, 2008). For many women, platforms become sites of aspirational display, driving demand for products aligned with beauty and lifestyle ideals (Shepherd, 2020). Secondly, algorithmic targeting reinforces gendered markets by using data to customize advertising. While efficient, this practice often perpetuates traditional stereotypes, directing wellness and cosmetic ads towards women, and tech or finance ads towards men, thereby segmenting the digital marketplace along gender lines (Noble S. U., 2018).



Finally, while social media has democratized digital entrepreneurship, enabling women and marginalized genders to enter the market directly (e.g., through influencer branding), this access is conditioned. Visibility algorithms and platform economics still privilege specific gender performances, meaning entrepreneurial success is not evenly distributed across all genders (Duffy, 2017). This Research aims to understand the social media experiences of women coming from a variety of countries and occupations. A survey has been used to record their responses to questions related to the lived impact of social media on business dynamics, mental health ramifications, awareness of rights, freedom, political decision making, health awareness, entrepreneurial aspirations, finances, etc. Further, relevant analysis has been drawn and presented for effective policy formation.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze patterns of social media usage among young women, including platform preferences, time investment, and purposes of engagement.
2. To examine how social media contributes to confidence-building, skill development, and digital identity formation in personal, academic, and professional contexts.
3. To assess the extent to which women utilize social media for economic or entrepreneurial activities, including self-promotion, networking, and business growth.
4. To evaluate the psychological and emotional impacts of social media use, with attention to experiences of motivation, stress, comparison, and well-being.
5. To explore how women navigate criticism, privacy concerns, and political expression in digital spaces, highlighting the negotiation of visibility and safety.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection between social media, gender, and economic engagement may reflect a significant change in today's digital society. As digital technologies change the traditional economy's dynamics, women's economic responsibilities and opportunities are being drastically transformed. The relationship between social media platforms and women's economic empowerment is examined in this literature review, which also looks at how digital technology both makes it easier and harder for women to engage in the modern economy.

By examining Facebook advertising data from over 1.4 billion users across 217 countries, (García, 2017) provide essential evidence that online social networks could aid in reducing the economic gender gap and removing barriers that women encounter when attempting to access informational resources.

Social Media as an Entrepreneurial Enabler Transforming Traditional Business Models

Social media platforms have significantly altered the way women engage with economic opportunities and accelerated women's entrepreneurship. According to anthropological data from northern Chile, south India, and southeast Italy provided by (Nicolescu, 2021), women successfully start small but prestigious businesses by using social media to meet local social and cultural demands. Their study demonstrates how women break down major structural barriers in their communities by using social media to alter people's views of work and traditional labour practices. (Elshantaly, 2022) conducted in-depth interviews with 14 businesswomen in the United Arab Emirates in 2022. Researchers found that social media platforms significantly reduced barriers to women reaching their goals and helped them become self-sufficient and start their own businesses. In particular, social media helped redefine and position women's roles in a way that would allow them to become financially independent, according to their research.

Systematic Evidence of Digital Empowerment

According to PRISMA guidelines, Tareq Rasul et al. conducted a systematic review in 2020 and found that social media directly enables women in many nations to start businesses on these platforms. According to their research, social media plays a significant role in fostering innovation, creating jobs, reducing poverty, and advancing the economy in many developing nations worldwide. It appears to be a helpful online resource for advancing fresh business concepts as well.



Digital transformation helps women-owned businesses in a number of ways, according to (Hazudin, 2021). These include improved customer value, improved business practices, financial stability, and the ability to reach a global audience. More than 75% of participants agreed, according to their study, that digital business assisted female entrepreneurs in better organizing and streamlining their operations.

Economic Empowerment Mechanisms

Barrier Reduction and Market Access

By reducing trade barriers, enhancing access to information and capital, and simplifying business operations, digital technologies assist women in launching their own enterprises and finding new employment (Sicat, 2020). Their data indicates that e-commerce lowers startup and operating costs, thereby lowering entry barriers for micro, small, and medium-sized businesses.

According to (Kataria, 2022) social media eliminates geographic barriers for customers and is the most cost-effective communication tool for advertising goods and services. According to their study, there have been successful business ventures started by women using Instagram and WhatsApp; by 2018, one of these entrepreneurs had made Rs 5 crore.

Financial Independence and Business Success

Around 29% of respondents launched digital enterprises to supplement their income while working from home, and leveraging online platforms boosted sales by as much as 40% (Hazudin S. , 2021). Their study found that by lowering operating and travel costs, digital transformation helps women earn more money. (Bagani, 2022) found that women are comparatively more successful at making sales on social media platforms after analysing empirical data from 110 small company owners. According to their research, increasing sales volume is significantly influenced by people's opinions about social media and their level of consumer trust.

Market Transformation and Consumer Behaviour

The Rise of the “Her Economy”

In their 2024 study, (Zhang, 2024) explore how women's purchasing power and marketing strategies have fueled the expansion of the "her economy" in the era of new media. To demonstrate how women, new media, and the consumer market have developed together and how crucial new media is in influencing women's buying habits, their study looks at how marketing strategies impact social media platforms.



In 2023, Dr. Iqbal Sayeed and associates investigate whether social media marketing is more effective for women than for men. They come to the conclusion that women seem to respond better to social media marketing. According to their research, women may be more influenced when it comes to basing their purchasing decisions on advertisements that are aired on electronic media.

Digital Platform Utilization Patterns

According to (Mađra-Sawicka, 2020) study, which looks at social media use in eight countries—four of which are emerging economies and four of which are developed—women in emerging economies use social media more frequently for business. According to their findings, using Facebook for business is mostly linked to positive experiences for both groups, with older respondents citing marketing as a key benefit. (Lichy, 2020) examine the role social media plays in assisting women-led microbusinesses in Lebanon. They learn that female micro-entrepreneurs provide for their families and themselves while exhibiting a sincere capacity to exploit their social networks for profit. By showing how social technologies support women-run microbusinesses, their study advances our understanding of digitalization in marketing.

Challenges and Digital Divides

Access and Ownership Inequalities

Particularly in rural areas, women are less likely than men to own smartphones exclusively, according to (Islam, 2023) surveys on gender disparities in digital literacy, access, and use among young people in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. They found that women's cell phones are usually "household phones" that are used with family members, which affects how much time women can spend on smartphones and the internet. In 2022, (Tan, 2022) examined the impact of social media on gender inequality and found that gender discrimination makes women less likely to engage in political activities. This implies that social media negatively impacts gender inequality in national and political contexts. The study also shows that what people see on social media may have an impact on their beliefs and behaviour regarding gender issues.



Visibility and Authenticity Challenges

In their 2019 study, (Duffy, 2019) examine the gendered aspect of visibility among Instagram content creators by interviewing 25 aspiring and seasoned Instagram users. They found that women attempt to appear truthful while avoiding accusations of being "too real" or "not real enough." The "authenticity bind," as it is called, is a gendered phenomenon that mirrors the larger policing of women in online communities. The same old story or a web of possibilities? The article "Women Digital Entrepreneurs and Intersectionality Theory" critically examines the ways in which intersectionality and social positionality impact the operations of digital enterprises. By outlining the benefits and drawbacks that UK women digital entrepreneurs encounter due to the intersection of social positions of gender, race, and class status, this study challenges the notion that the internet is a neutral place for entrepreneurship.

Global Perspectives and Technological Empowerment

Cross-Cultural Digital Empowerment

In their investigation of social media use in Taiwan, (Magdalena, 2020) find that both sexes use social media platforms to support their businesses and acquire experience. Their study found that Taiwanese women are more conscious of the benefits of social media, especially Facebook, for empowering and bolstering their businesses. The sexes differ significantly in how they use YouTube and Facebook. A comprehensive study by (Ndou V. , 2024) suggests that new digital technologies could empower women entrepreneurs by enabling them to overcome barriers and create more beneficial network environments. Their research identifies areas that require more study and provides a theoretical discussion of how digital technologies give women the opportunity to overcome barriers in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Synthesis and Future Directions

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The literature review shows that social media affects women's economic participation in a number of ways. These findings contradict optimistic analyses that argue that online platforms ease global inequality by allowing disadvantaged people to participate in international economic flows (Nicolescu V. , 2021). Instead, they demonstrate how individuals can use social media to make small but meaningful strides toward economic stability while also progressively changing local gender and employment norms.



Technology, according to (Sicat M. , 2020), is not a magic bullet for eliminating all gender disparities in commerce because women's access to and use of ICTs and digital technologies tend to lag behind men's. They stress that in order to benefit from digital technologies; well-designed and precisely targeted policies are necessary.

Research Gaps and Policy Implications

While entrepreneurship and technology-related topics have been extensively discussed, S. (Hazudin S. A., 2021) note that the role of female entrepreneurs has not received enough attention in the current body of scholarly discourse. Their study highlights potential risks that can avert business failures while providing valuable insights into how digital transformation impacts women-owned businesses.

Despite their blatant gender imbalance, online social networks may help women access informational resources, according to (García K. , 2017). The limitations of the current study are highlighted by (Tan, 2022), who also highlight the need for more comprehensive approaches that examine the advantages and disadvantages of social media as well as meta-analytical or systematic methodologies.

This review of the literature reveals that social media and digital technology are altering women's economic participation in several interconnected ways. The research consistently shows both positive potential and persistent issues in digital environments. The study found that social media can help women overcome traditional barriers to entrepreneurship and create new business opportunities. (Rasul, 2020) and two other authors provide compelling evidence of social media's direct contribution to the empowerment of female entrepreneurs across cultural contexts. However, not everyone has access to digital empowerment, and online spaces often perpetuate existing inequalities, as demonstrated by (Islam A. , 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social media platforms have drastically reshaped the way people interact and exchange information in the modern era. These digital networks allow individuals across the world to communicate instantly, which has led to new patterns in friendship, business, and even activism. The speed at which news and ideas travel today is largely attributed to the widespread use of these tools.

These online spaces help people stay in touch with those far away and enable sharing experiences in new ways.



On the positive side, social networks can foster community engagement and give people a space to organize around shared interests or causes. Campaigns for social change, as well as public discussion of pressing issues, often gain momentum thanks to digital outreach.

However, the effects of social media are not entirely beneficial. The rapid spread of information sometimes makes it difficult to separate truth from falsehood, and misleading stories can influence public opinion and decision making. The tendency for users to encounter mainly the views they already hold sometimes leads to deeper social divides.

On a personal level, frequent use of social platforms can impact mental and emotional health. People may feel disconnected or pressured as they compare themselves to carefully selected snapshots from others' lives. Features that encourage comparison or competition sometimes heighten stress and lower self-confidence.

The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped the global marketplace, transforming how businesses communicate, how consumers make decisions, and how brands create value. No longer just a space for social interaction, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn have become integral parts of the economic infrastructure, thus influencing everything from marketing strategies to consumer psychology and even product innovation.

Transformation of Marketing and Brand Communication

Social media has shifted marketing from one-way communication to a two-way conversation between businesses and consumers. Traditional advertising relied on print, television, or radio to broadcast messages to a passive audience. In contrast, today's marketplace thrives on engagement, interaction, and community-building.

Through comments, likes, and shares, consumers actively shape brand narratives. According to Kapoor et al. (2022), social media marketing enables real-time feedback loops, allowing firms to adapt products and campaigns quickly. This immediacy reduces the gap between consumer needs and company response, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty.



Moreover, social media has blurred the boundaries between content and commerce. Influencers, brand ambassadors, and micro-celebrities promote products in ways that appear organic and relatable (Abidin, 2021). This phenomenon, known as influencer marketing, has become one of the fastest-growing segments of digital advertising (Influencer Marketing Hub., 2024). (Evans, 2017) found that authenticity and trust are the main drivers of purchase intention in influencer-led marketing (qualities that traditional advertising often struggles to achieve).

Rise of Social Commerce and Consumer Empowerment

Social media platforms are no longer just promotional tools; they are now transactional spaces. The introduction of features such as Instagram Shops, Facebook Marketplace, and TikTok Shopping has given birth to social commerce, where discovery, engagement, and purchase occur within a single ecosystem (Statista, 2024).

This integration has significantly altered consumer behavior. A study by Zhang and Benyoucef (2020) highlights that social commerce fosters both emotional and social value, encouraging impulse buying while building community trust as a part of which, consumers are not just purchasing goods; they are participating in shared experiences and peer validation cycles.

Social media also empowers consumers through greater information transparency. Reviews, user-generated content, and peer recommendations have made it harder for companies to control brand reputation unilaterally (Mangold, 2021). Instead, the “collective voice” of users now shapes legitimacy in the marketplace. This democratization of influence means even small businesses can compete with larger firms if they effectively manage online engagement and authenticity (Deloitte Digital, 2023).

Data-Driven Personalization and Targeting

Another major impact of social media on the marketplace is the rise of data-driven personalization. Platforms collect massive amounts of behavioral data, ranging from browsing history to engagement metrics, to deliver personalized advertisements and product recommendations (PwC, 2023). This has led to more efficient targeting and improved conversion rates (Liu, 2023).



However, it has also raised ethical questions about privacy and manipulation. Tuten and Solomon (2021) note that while algorithmic marketing allows businesses to reach the “right” audience, it can also reinforce stereotypes and create digital echo chambers, for example, gender or racial profiling in ad targeting can result in unequal exposure to job opportunities, financial services, or luxury goods. Thus, while social media enhances marketing precision, it also introduces new forms of digital inequality.

Disruption of Traditional Retail Models

Social media’s influence has also disrupted traditional retail structures. Direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands have flourished, bypassing intermediaries and building loyal communities online. Companies like Glossier, Nykaa, and Gymshark began as digital-first brands that used social media to cultivate identity-based followings before expanding into physical markets (Deloitte Digital, 2024). This trend reflects a shift from product-centric to relationship-centric commerce, where community engagement becomes a core business asset (Noble S. M., 2022). The marketplace has evolved from a transactional space into a relational ecosystem, with trust and interaction replacing distance and anonymity.

Simultaneously, small businesses and artisans, particularly in emerging economies, have benefited from low-cost entry into digital markets. Platforms such as Facebook Marketplace and WhatsApp Business provide access to customers without requiring extensive infrastructure (Facebook Business & Bain & Company, 2022). This inclusivity has helped local sellers reach global audiences, promoting micro-entrepreneurship and community-based trade.

Challenges: Competition, Credibility, and Consumer Fatigue

While social media has expanded market access, it has also intensified competition. The ease of entry has led to market saturation, making it difficult for new businesses to stand out. Additionally, issues of fake reviews, influencer fraud, and misleading advertising undermine consumer trust (European Commission, 2023).

Overexposure to promotional content has created what scholars term “digital fatigue”, where consumers become desensitized to online advertising (PwC., 2023). De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019) warn that excessive commercial messaging risks alienating users and eroding the sense of authenticity that once made social media marketing effective.



Economic and Employment Implications

On a macroeconomic scale, social media has become a driver of new industries, from digital marketing agencies to influencer management firms and analytics companies. Millions of individuals now earn income directly or indirectly through social platforms, contributing to what the (World Economic Forum, 2024) calls the digital participation economy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods exploratory approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences various aspects of women's lives, including their mental health, economic participation, and political awareness. The qualitative and descriptive quantitative methods were selected because they enable deeper exploration of participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and opinions, insights that cannot be captured through purely quantitative measures. By collecting open-ended responses from diverse participants, the study seeks to uncover underlying patterns, challenges, and opportunities related to women's engagement with social media across different cultural and professional contexts.

Research Design

Participant responses were collected through an open-ended questionnaire. This approach was considered most suitable to allow respondents to provide more options and opinions, giving the data more diversity than would be possible with a closed-question. Participants were selected using mixed purposeful sampling, a method recognized for its flexibility and meeting multiple interests and needs (Nyimbili Phd, 2024). We systematically captured information from a specific sample of women, entrepreneurs and employees operating across diverse sectors and regions and who are able to understand English well to be able to answer questions, with sending questionnaires to those who work, pursue higher education and contribute at home. Participants were made aware of voluntary participation; privacy and data collection followed institutional ethical requirements. Subsequently, the interested participants filled a structured questionnaire to capture pertinent insights related to the research problem. The informed consent of the participants was obtained through Google Forms. We received 30 responses from women for 20 questions.



Setting and Sampling

An online survey was prepared for data collection. We also went to universities, and different places of the city, shared the survey through a barcode and also sent it via WhatsApp. We circulated the survey across two online international women communities as well on LinkedIn, highlighting the required two eligibility criteria to answer the survey:

- A. A women who is an entrepreneur or is an employee.
- B. A woman who understands English well.

Circulating an online questionnaire can help collect diverse opinions from participants hailing from different countries which leads to a wider understanding of women's experience across different countries. The most frequent advantages of the online data collection as documented in the previous studies are: (a) decreased sample selection bias, (b) saving of time, money and effort, (c) swift and easy access to diverse populations which were far away and inaccessible, (d) less tiring and quick returns, (e) Getting larger sample size compared to paper questionnaires, however, on the other hand, there are certain shortcomings and disadvantages of online data collection as follows: (a) student's lack of willingness to respond, (b) lower response rate (Ali Khalaf, 2020).

30 responses were collected from nine different countries such as India, Iran, Iraq, Lesotho, Nepal, America, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Participants

30 women between the ages 18 to 35 years old who were actively engaged in business activities, either home based, micro-enterprises, or small firms and using social media platforms for at least one hour daily and for different purposes were chosen for our survey.

Participants were who are employees or business owners, in India, Iran, Iraq, Lesotho, Nepal, America, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe were taken on board. This survey was conducted among women who work and have a good command over English to answer questions properly and to align with the goal of the research which inquires the impact of social media on women in a variety of ways. Our respondents have different roles in their societies like a student, veterinary doctor, CEO, farmer, healthcare provider, civil draftsman, Software Engineer, businesswomen, etc.



Instruments

We used a Google Form which included open ended questions for data collection purpose with 5 main sections and 20 questions to collect data.

The survey comprised five sections; the first part captures the participant's Basic Information profile, with short answer and multiple-choice questions about Age, country, occupation and the highest level of Education completed. The second part gathered data on Social Media Usage, and the purpose of its usage with multiple choice and check box questions inquiring if they use social media for business purposes, the time they spend on social media, and for how long they have been using social media for economic purposes. Section three inquired the impact of social media on Mental Health with multiple choice and short answer type questions discovering the experiences of stress, anxiety, or comparison after using social media. It also focused on the examination of the impact of social media on increased awareness of women's rights and gender equality. Section four emphasized Political and Health Awareness with multiple choice and long answer questions for the respondents to elaborate on political participation and awareness in the purview of social media. The last section discovered Economic and Gendered Experiences. The questionnaire solicited long answers for this section to broadly capture the intention and opinion of the respondents regarding the challenges related to privacy, judgment, or expectations in response to what the respondents shared online. The questions regarding the influence of social media on independence, control over finances, and development of confidence and professional identity had also been included.

The questionnaire was developed by the research team after reviewing prior literature and existing instruments related to women's empowerment, mental health, and digital engagement. It aimed to collect in-depth qualitative and quantitative insights into how social media influences women's lives across different dimensions: economic participation, mental health, and political awareness. It was designed to capture not only behavioral patterns of social media usage, but also emotional, psychological, and social effects experienced by women who actively use digital platforms for personal or professional purposes.



Procedures

The data collection process began with an initial review of existing literature related to the impact of social media on women's lives. This helped the research team identify commonly used methods and guided the design of the questionnaire. Based on the research objectives, the team developed open-ended questions and defined the target sample: the women who are employees or entrepreneurs with active social media usage.

After finalizing the questionnaire, the research team prepared the Google Form and distributed it both online and in person with the help of barcodes. Participants were reached through universities, workplaces, LinkedIn, direct engagement and international women's communities. They were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained through the Google Forms before participants began answering the questions.

Data collection took place between October 24 and November 4, 2025. Participants could complete the form at their convenience during this period. Confidentiality was ensured by keeping responses anonymous and not collecting any sensitive information. All the data was stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

Analytic strategy

The collected responses were organized and analyzed using Google Sheets and Google Form's built-in charts and graphs to identify general patterns and trends across participants' responses. The thematic analysis followed a multi-stage process. First, all open-ended responses were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts related to empowerment, emotional impact, economic participation, and political expression. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, allowing relationships between codes to be identified. Finally, selective coding was used to refine and name core themes that captured shared patterns across participants' narratives.

The analysis began with reading all responses several times to gain familiarity with the content. Next, key phrases and recurring ideas were highlighted and grouped into categories related to the main research areas: social media's impact on women's economic participation, mental health, and political awareness. These categories were then refined into broader themes that reflected shared experiences and viewpoints among participants.



Accuracy and reliability were maintained by ensuring that only eligible participants: women who are employees or entrepreneurs with active social media usage and good English proficiency were included. These criteria were verified through specific screening questions in the form.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were carefully made throughout the research process. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were fully protected by collecting data anonymously through Google Forms. All responses were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

Before beginning the questionnaire, each participant was presented with a consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and how their data would be used.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team comprised seven researchers who were either university students or recent university graduates or postgraduate studies in the fields of social sciences, business management, humanities, etc. Five of the seven researchers identified as women, and the team included one member from Iran, while the remaining researchers were based in India. These academic backgrounds and gendered positions may have shaped the researchers' sensitivity to issues of digital identity, gendered participation, and economic empowerment in online spaces.

Recognizing that their familiarity with social media and proximity to higher education contexts could influence interpretation, the researchers adopted an inductive approach to thematic analysis, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the analysis to minimize bias, and care was taken to represent both enabling and constraining experiences expressed by participants.

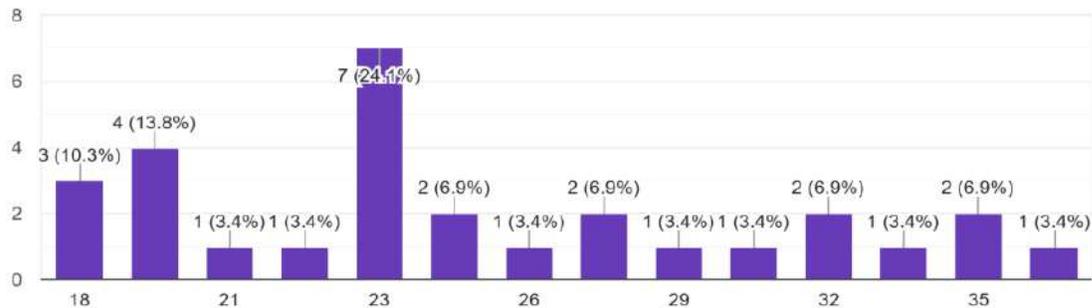


RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Chart 1: Age variation of respondents

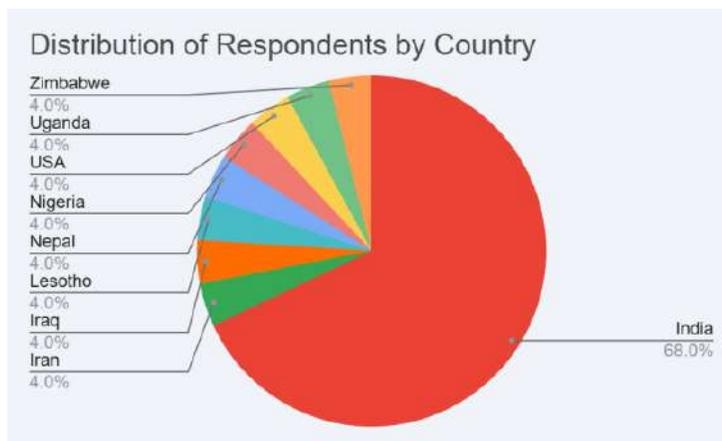
Age:

29 responses



The data reveals that the largest proportion of respondents are 23 years old (24.1%), followed by those aged 20 (13.8%) and 18 (10.3%). Other age groups contribute between 3.4% and 6.9%. Overall, the sample is dominated by young adults in their early twenties, reflecting a digitally active and socially connected cohort well suited for studies involving social media engagement.

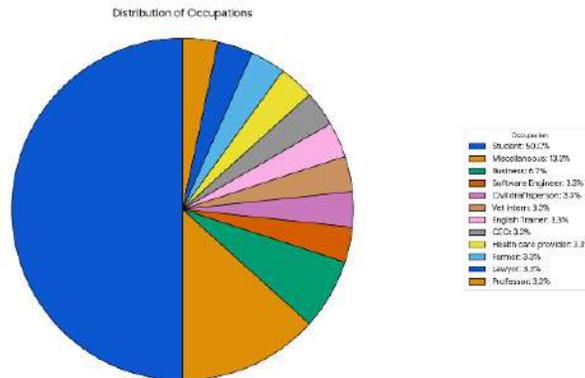
Chart 2: Variation in the nationality of respondents





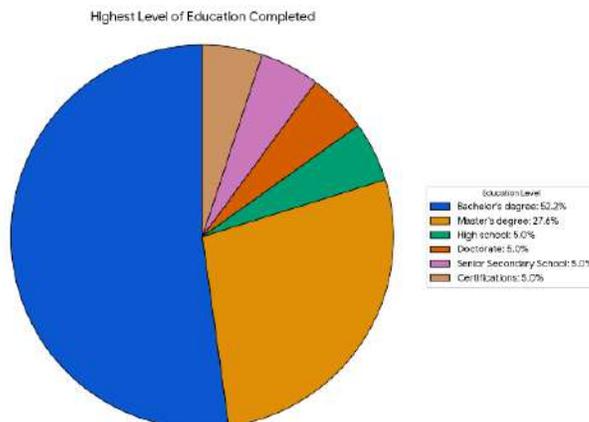
A substantial majority of respondents (68.0%) are from India, with the remainder representing eight other countries, including USA, Iran, Iraq, Lesotho, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. This indicates a predominantly Indian sample with limited international diversity, yet it provides a modest cross-cultural perspective on social media use and its perceived impacts.

Chart 3: Occupations of respondents



Students constitute the largest occupational group (48.3%), while 'miscellaneous' accounts for approximately 13.8%, Business (6.9%) and all other categories—including entrepreneurs, professionals, and interns—each represent 3.4%. The predominance of students aligns with the youthful demographic profile observed in Chart 1, suggesting that the data primarily reflect early-career individuals exploring digital spaces for learning, networking, and professional development.

Chart 4: Average education level of respondents



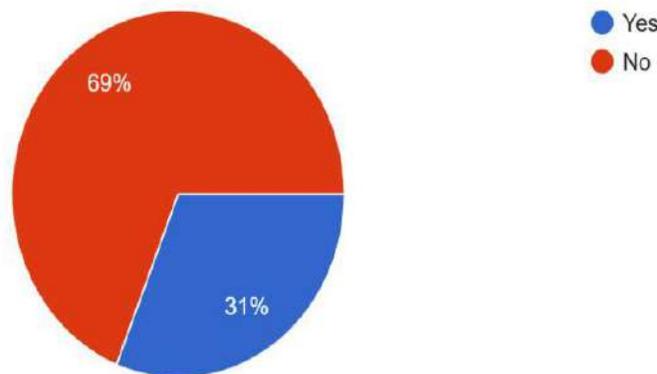


More than half of the respondents (55.2%) hold a Bachelor's degree, and 27.6% possess a Master's degree. The remaining participants have completed high school, certificates, or doctoral studies. This educational distribution indicates a well-qualified sample capable of critical and strategic engagement with social media for personal and financial advancement.

Chart 5: Percentage of respondents who use social media for economic purposes

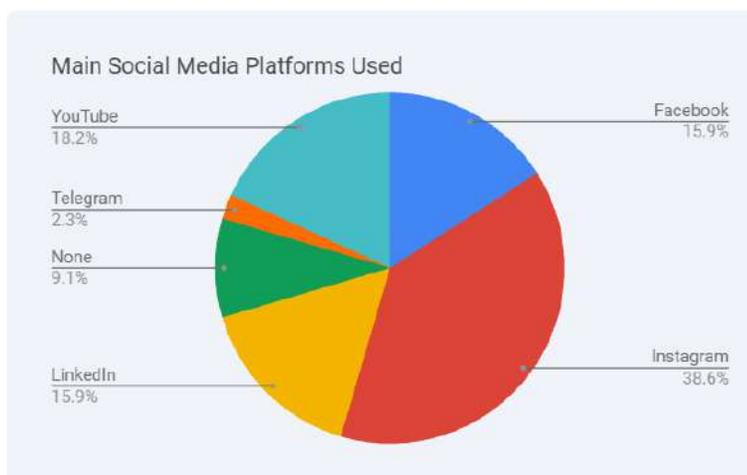
Have you used social media for income, marketing, or business purposes?

29 responses



While social media use is widespread, only 31% of respondents report using it for income generation or business, compared to 69% who do not. This disparity suggests that despite high overall engagement, the economic potential of digital platforms remains underutilized within the sample.

Chart 6: Social Media platforms used by respondents



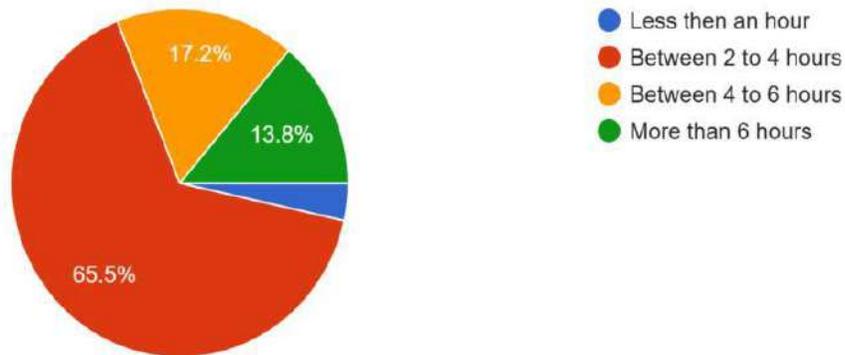


This pie chart reveals that Instagram is the most predominantly used social media platform, accounting for 38.6% of responses. YouTube, LinkedIn, and Facebook follow, each representing a significant portion of usage. A smaller percentage of respondents indicate that they use no platforms or Telegram. This suggests Instagram is a key platform for users, potentially for both personal and economic purposes, given the survey's focus.

Chart 7: Average time spent on social media apps per day

How much time do you spend on social media daily?

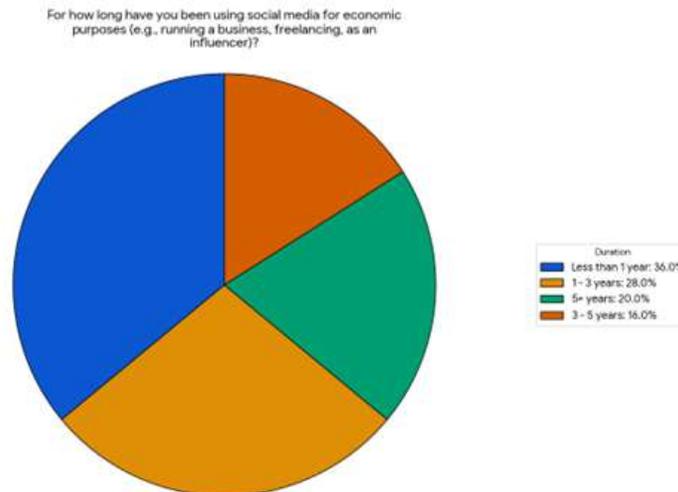
29 responses



The majority of participants (65.5%) spend between two and four hours daily on social media. Smaller groups report spending four to six hours (17.2%) or more than six hours (13.8%). Only 3.4% use social media for less than one hour. These findings indicate a high degree of daily engagement, characteristic of digitally immersed individuals who integrate social media into multiple aspects of their daily routines.

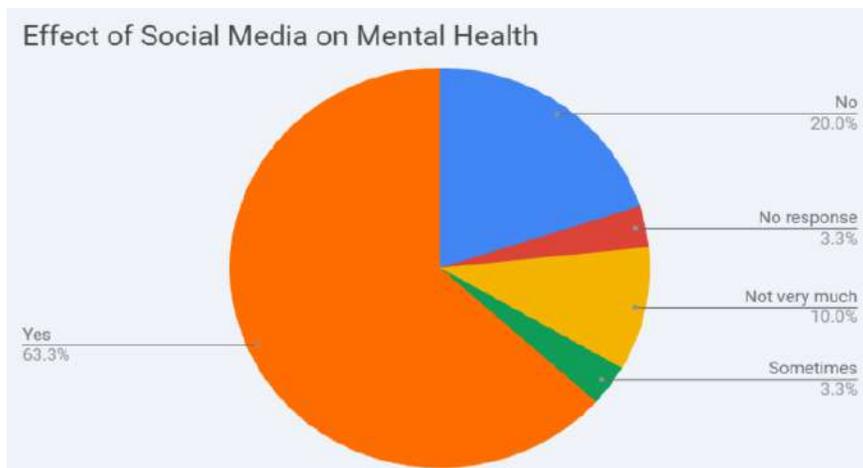


Chart 8: Average duration of using social media apps for economic purposes



Among the respondents who utilize social media for economic activities, 37.5% have been doing so for less than one year, 25% for one to three years, and 20.8% for over five years. The remainder (16.7%) report three to five years of experience. This distribution suggests a recent increase in digital entrepreneurship, with newer users entering spaces previously dominated by experienced participants.

Chart 9: Effect of Social Media usage on mental health

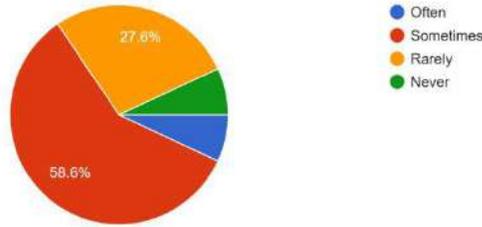


A significant proportion (63.3%) of respondents report that social media has affected their mental health, while 20.0% report no impact. Others describe partial or mixed effects. These findings indicate that respondents perceive social media as having a noticeable influence on their psychological well-being, often balancing between empowerment and emotional strain depending on usage intensity and content consumption patterns.



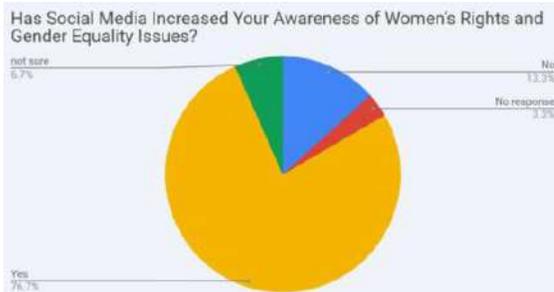
Chart 10: Maladaptive effects of social media usage

How often do you experience stress, anxiety, or comparison after using social media?
29 responses



experience mild emotional strain from social media, suggesting its mixed impact on psychological well-being.

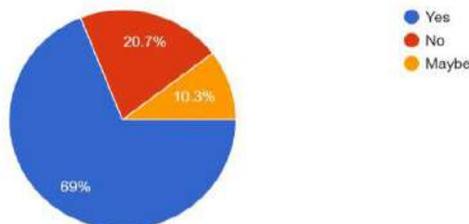
Chart 11: Attitudes towards engagement with social media and increase in awareness



This pie chart illustrates that a significant majority of respondents (76.7%) believe social media has increased their awareness of women's rights and gender equality issues. A smaller portion (13.3%) reported no increase in awareness, while a combined 10% were either unsure or provided no response. This suggests a generally positive perceived impact of social media on awareness of these issues among the surveyed group.

Chart 12: Attitudes towards engagement with social media and safety to express

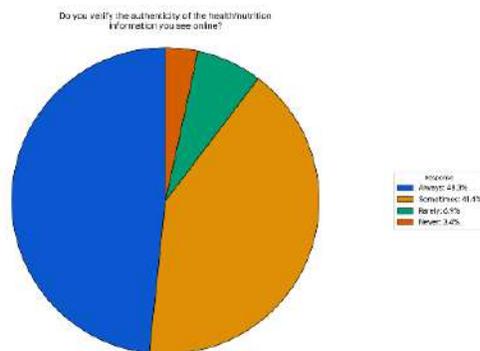
Do you think social media provides a safe space for women to express their opinions?
29 responses





Findings show that 69% of respondents feel comfortable expressing their opinions online, while 10.3% report only partial comfort. The remaining 20.7% express discomfort or reluctance to share personal or political views. This pattern highlights an ongoing negotiation between empowerment and caution, as users—particularly women—balance the benefits of self-expression with concerns about privacy, criticism, and digital safety.

Chart 13: Attitudes towards verification of information consumed



The chart shows that 48.3% of respondents always verify the authenticity of health or nutrition information they see online, while 41.4% do so sometimes. Only 6.9% rarely verify, and another 6.9% never check the credibility of such content. Overall, the data indicate that most respondents demonstrate moderate to strong awareness of online misinformation, reflecting a generally responsible approach to consuming health-related content on social media.

DISCUSSION

While the Results section presented descriptive patterns and self-reported perceptions, the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and broader gendered digital dynamics.

The findings of this study demonstrate that young women's engagement with social media is multidimensional, involving ongoing negotiations of identity, emotional experience, visibility, and agency. Social media emerges as both a space of opportunity and a site of constraint, where self-expression, learning, and entrepreneurship coexist with comparison, caution, and emotional labour. The thematic analysis allowed us to trace how women construct meaning in their digital participation across personal, social, and political domains. The discussion below considers each theme in relation to these broader dynamics.



Empowerment, Independence, and Digital Identity Formation

The findings reinforce existing literature that conceptualizes social media as a space for networked identity construction and empowerment (Hearn, 2008; Duffy, 2017). Participants described confidence-building and identity formation as gradual processes shaped by sustained engagement with digital platforms rather than immediate outcomes. Several respondents reported that social media enabled them to present themselves more professionally and assert greater autonomy over their personal and career trajectories. One participant noted that “over time, I’ve become more confident and aware of how to present myself professionally,” while another shared that their “professional as well as personal identity and confidence have evolved very much because of social media... I got out of my comfort zone and learned new things.”

Economic participation was closely linked with emotional and social empowerment, supporting prior research that highlights social media’s role in women’s financial agency (Chiguvi, 2023; Churk, 2023). Participants associated managing content, skills, or income online with a heightened sense of independence and control. As one respondent explained, “It has made me feel more independent and confident, knowing that I can use my skills and social media platforms to create opportunities and have some control over my career and finances.” Similarly, another participant observed that “managing my own content and income gave me a sense of control over my finances and helped me develop useful skills like marketing, communication, and time management.”

For students and early-career respondents, empowerment also emerged through self-directed learning and professional clarity. One participant described how social media helped them “organize my learning, find valuable information, and build a clearer sense of my academic goals and identity as a future medical professional.” These experiences align with scholarship emphasizing digital platforms as tools for informal learning and capacity-building among women (Chiguvi, 2023).

Impact on Daily Life

Consistent with prior research on digital well-being (Merino, 2024; Hecht, 2024), participants characterized the impact of social media on daily life as mixed and contingent on patterns of use. Many respondents explicitly described social media as simultaneously beneficial and burdensome, providing access to information and connection while also contributing to distraction and emotional fatigue. One participant explained that social media “helps me stay informed and connected, but



sometimes it also gets overwhelming or distracting,” while another noted that it “can be uplifting and useful, but it can also affect focus and mental peace if not used mindfully.”

Several participants emphasized the importance of intentional engagement, echoing research that highlights user agency in moderating digital outcomes (Tufekci, 2017). One respondent described consciously controlling content consumption, using platforms primarily for educational purposes and avoiding passive scrolling. These reflections suggest that women experience social media as a negotiated space, where its effects depend on self-regulation and mindful participation.

Awareness and Consciousness Building

The findings demonstrate that social media plays a critical role in expanding awareness of women’s rights, gender equality, and social issues, supporting existing scholarship on digital activism and consciousness-building (Kumari, 2024).

Participants reported encountering advocacy campaigns, real-life narratives, and informational content that broadened their understanding of gender-based inequalities. One respondent stated that social media “has made me more aware of women’s rights and gender equality by sharing real stories, campaigns, and informative content,” while another highlighted exposure to “advocate groups that have brought to light women’s rights and gender equality issues relevant in the modern-day world.”

Other participants emphasized the platform’s role in keeping them informed, noting that it helped them “learn more and stay informed.” These responses suggest that social media functions as an informal educational arena, enabling civic learning and critical reflection, particularly for young women whose offline environments may not consistently offer such exposure.

Motivations for Using Social Media

Participants’ motivations for engaging with social media were largely instrumental and goal-oriented, reinforcing findings from earlier studies on digital entrepreneurship and professional networking (Duffy, 2017; Churk, 2023). Many respondents described using social media to promote skills, attract customers, and expand professional networks. One participant explained that “the main reason I started using social media for economic purposes was to promote my skills and reach more people... then I realized social media could help me attract customers and create new opportunities.”



Another emphasized their intent “to take my business to the market and create a name for the business in the digital market.”

Others highlighted learning and knowledge acquisition as primary motivations, using social media to stay updated and access educational resources. For students and early-career individuals, platforms supported academic preparation and skill development, reinforcing the perception of social media as a strategic resource rather than a purely recreational space.

Attitudes Toward Criticism in Online Spaces

Responses revealed varied strategies for managing criticism, aligning with Duffy’s (2019) concept of the “authenticity bind” faced by women in digital spaces. Some participants reported minimal criticism due to limited personal sharing, while others encountered judgment and responded by setting boundaries or focusing on constructive feedback. One respondent shared that “people judge or make unwanted comments, so I limit what I share and focus on positive feedback,” while another stated that they “take some of the remarks seriously and make amendments.”

In more extreme cases, criticism led to withdrawal from platforms altogether, with one participant noting that they sometimes “delete the account.” These findings underscore the emotional labor involved in sustaining online visibility and highlight how women actively regulate participation to protect mental well-being.

Openness to Express Political Opinions

Political expression was approached cautiously by most participants, echoing findings by Raza Shah and Waseem (2023) on moderated political engagement in digital spaces. While a small number of respondents reported feeling comfortable or very comfortable expressing political views, the majority expressed discomfort or avoidance. Several participants described political expression as “risky,” citing concerns about conflict or misunderstanding.

Even among those who felt somewhat comfortable, political engagement was carefully managed through selective sharing and audience awareness. These findings suggest that while social media enhances political awareness, women’s visible political participation remains constrained by perceived risks and socio-cultural expectations, reinforcing the notion that digital publics are not equally safe or accessible for all voices.



CONCLUSION

This exploratory mixed-methods study examined how social media intersects with gender, identity, and marketplace participation among a small, cross-national sample of young women. The findings indicate that social media platforms operate as complex digital spaces where perceived opportunities for empowerment coexist with emotional, structural, and visibility-related constraints. Rather than functioning as uniformly liberating environments, these platforms require women to continuously negotiate agency, self-presentation, and safety.

Within the scope of this sample, participants reported using social media not only for communication or leisure but also for professional visibility, networking, and exploratory entrepreneurial activity. For some, these practices contributed to increased confidence and perceived economic opportunity, particularly in early career stages. However, empowerment was experienced as conditional and negotiated, shaped by algorithmic exposure, comparison pressures, and gendered expectations.

The study also suggests that social media contributes to heightened awareness of gender rights and social issues, though this awareness does not consistently translate into open political expression. Many participants adopted cautious engagement strategies due to concerns about criticism, misinterpretation, or digital safety, highlighting the persistence of gendered constraints in online public spheres.

These findings must be interpreted as indicative rather than representative, given the small sample size, student-heavy composition, and predominance of respondents from India. Nevertheless, the study contributes to understanding how women perceive and navigate social media as both a resource and a risk. It underscores the need for gender-sensitive platform design, digital literacy initiatives, and policy interventions that support women's economic participation while addressing emotional and structural inequalities embedded in digital environments.



LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the sample primarily consisted of women aged 18–33, which restricts the generational and occupational generalizability of the findings. Second, the data relied on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Third, the results are shaped by an Instagram-centric sample and therefore may not reflect experiences on other social media platforms. Fourth, cross-cultural diversity was limited, as most participants were based in India. Finally, economic outcomes could not be objectively verified, as financial impacts were based on participants' perceptions rather than documented income records.

Given the small, predominantly India-based sample and the high proportion of student respondents, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative rather than representative of women globally

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing that social media serves both as a source of empowerment and as a space for emotional negotiation among young women, policy frameworks should go beyond economic inclusion to focus on enhancing digital autonomy, mental well-being, and fair participation across online platforms.

Integrating digital entrepreneurship into existing skill development initiatives can substantially expand women's opportunities. Programs such as DAY–NRLM, DAY–NULM, STEP, and PMEGP could include components on social media branding, content and marketing strategies, online financial literacy, and client engagement analytics. By doing so, women can transform their everyday digital activities into viable entrepreneurial ventures, particularly benefiting those managing small or home-based enterprises.

State governments, in collaboration with universities, NGOs, and private incubators, could establish dedicated Digital Women's Entrepreneurship Incubation Centres. These hubs would provide shared infrastructure such as workspace, lighting and media tools, guidance from experienced content creators, and support with legal and business formalities, enabling women to develop projects within safe and resourceful environments.



To ensure gender-sensitive online environments, policy measures should strengthen grievance redress systems, promote transparency in content moderation, and implement gender-aware audits of algorithms that may undervalue women's content. These interventions shift accountability away from individual self-protection toward greater platform responsibility.

Mental health literacy also deserves structured integration into digital education. Schools and universities should introduce modules that help young users manage comparison pressures, handle public criticism, practice mindful engagement, and recognize emotional burnout. By framing these challenges as collective health concerns, the state can destigmatize emotional strain within digital spaces.

Encouraging inclusive civic dialogue online is equally vital. Governments can foster safe spaces for public conversation through academic forums, youth-led digital councils on gender and social justice, and targeted workshops on misinformation resilience and digital citizenship. Rather than expecting women to simply increase visibility, these measures create safer conditions for genuine participation.

Finally, strengthening market connectivity for women-led digital enterprises can expand their economic reach. National initiatives such as Mahila e-Haat, the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), and the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) could spotlight women entrepreneurs, simplify logistics and delivery, and introduce fee reductions for first-time sellers. Such steps would close the gap between digital skill development and practical access to broader markets.



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