



श्रीमती नाथीबाई दामोदर ठाकरसी महिला विद्यापीठ
SNDT Women's University, Mumbai



SNDTWU MONOGRAPH SERIES

**Refashioning of the Self: Constraint and Agency
of Young Women in the Digital World**

Dr. Rajni Nair, Dr. Putul Sathe & Dr. Vibhuti Patel

2026

Refashioning of the Self: Constraint and Agency of Young Women in the Digital World

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SNDT Women's University Press

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1, Nathibai Thackersey Road, Mumbai 400020

Published by:

SNDT Women's University Press

*Bharatratna Maharshi Karve Vidyavihar, Mumbai Churchgate Campus,
1, Nathibai Thackersey Road, Mumbai 400020*

Printed at:

SNDT Women's University Printers, Mumbai 400020

Published under SNDTWU MONOGRAPH SERIES

Published in 2026

ISBN: 978-93-48606-02-0

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About SNT Women's University

SNT Women's University is the first women's university in India and South-East Asia, founded in 1916 by Maharshi Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve with the vision of empowering women through education. The University is headquartered at Churchgate, Mumbai, with additional campuses at Juhu (Mumbai) and Karve Road (Pune). It has a vast academic structure comprising 37 university departments, 13 constituent institutions, and 174 affiliated colleges across Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, collectively serving over 70,000 students.

The University has consistently maintained strong academic standards and was awarded NAAC A+ Accreditation in 2025. In alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, it established the Centre for Holistic Education, Training and Novel Advancements (CHETNA) in 2022 to promote multidisciplinary and innovative learning. It has also strengthened its academic and research ecosystem through approximately ₹100 crore funding under the PM-USHA Scheme (2024) and is developing the Maharshi Karve Women Empowerment Knowledge Campus at Ballarpur, Chandrapur, with a major government investment to expand skill-based and employment-oriented education for women.

Beyond academics, SNTWU actively promotes innovation, culture, and student development through initiatives such as Abhivyakti Manch, Yuva Mahotsav, and Innovative Mahakumbh, which supports entrepreneurship and has nurtured incubated, funded, and pre-incubation startups involving students and faculty. The University also preserves Indian Knowledge Systems through BHAGYASY (Bhartiya Gyan, Sanskrit evam Yog Kendra) and the Jagarani Project, which highlights the contributions of Indian women scholars under the theme "Nari Se Narayani." It further strengthens global academic engagement through collaborations such as the International Conference on Climate Change (ICCC-2025) with CUNY, USA. Student welfare remains central through initiatives like Earn and Learn, anti-ragging measures, grievance redressal systems, health camps, and leadership programmes. The 75th Annual Convocation (2025) reflected the University's legacy and its forward-looking vision of innovation, sustainability, and ethical leadership for national development.

Message by Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor

It gives me immense pleasure to present this monograph authored by **Dr. Rajni Nair**, developed from her doctoral research in the field of Women's Studies at SNTD Women's University.

The monograph, titled **"Refashioning of the Self: Constraint and Agency of Young Women in the Digital World"** is based on the scholar's Ph.D. thesis completed under the guidance of **Dr. Putul Sathe** and **Dr. Vibhuti Patel** as Co-Guide. This work represents a significant scholarly contribution to the interdisciplinary study of gender and digital cultures, exploring how urban women negotiate, construct, and redefine their identities within the dynamic spaces of cyberspace. By examining the intersections of gender, technology, self-representation, and social interaction, the study offers valuable insights into the transformative impact of digital environments on contemporary women's lives.

The publication of this monograph reflects the University's commitment to making high-quality doctoral research accessible to a wider academic and professional community. Research of this nature contributes to the advancement of knowledge in Women's Studies and related interdisciplinary fields, while providing a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by digital technologies in shaping gendered experiences and identities.

I congratulate Dr. Rajni Nair on this noteworthy achievement. Her intellectual curiosity, perseverance, and dedication to scholarly inquiry have culminated in a publication that will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, academicians, students, policymakers, and practitioners interested in gender studies, media studies, digital sociology, and contemporary social transformations. I also extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Putul Sathe and Dr. Vibhuti Patel for their guidance, mentorship, and support throughout the research journey.

I am confident that this monograph will stimulate meaningful academic discourse and encourage further research on the evolving relationship between gender and technology. It highlights the importance of understanding how digital spaces influence identity formation, social participation, and empowerment in an increasingly connected world. On this auspicious occasion of the University Foundation Day (5 July 2026), I extend my best wishes to Ms. Rajni Nair and look forward to many more such scholarly contributions that showcase the richness and diversity of research emerging from SNTD Women's University.

Warm regards,

Prof. Dr. Ujwala Chakradeo
Vice-Chancellor, SNTD Women's University

INDEX

	Contents	Page No
	Chapter 1: Gender, Digital Space, and the Refashioning of the Self	1
1.1	Navigating the Rise of the Internet Society: Exploring Social- Cultural Dynamics in Virtual Spaces and Their Impact on Young Women in India.	2
1.2	Gender and virtual space- Fourth Wave digital feminism- Indian context.	3
1.3	Gendered self-formation of subjectivity, agency-negotiation-resistance and the fashioning of the self among urban college girls.	4
1.4	Feminist theoretical positions	6
1.5	Rationale of the Study	8
1.6	Research Questions	9
1.7	Objectives	10
1.8	Methodology	10
1.9	Chapter scheme	11
1.10	Limitations of the study	11
1.11	Significance of the study	12
1.12	Operational Definitions of Key Concepts	12
	Chapter 2: Cyberspace, Gender, and Power: Feminist Debates on Networked Life	15
2.1	Cyberspace and Cyberculture	16
2.2	The Network Society: Information, Identity, and Power	17
2.3	Counterpublics and the Internet: Contestation, Exclusion, and Participation	18
2.4	Feminist Standpoint Theory: Knowledge, Location, and Power	19
2.5	Cyborgs, Cyberculture, and Cyberfeminism: Technology as Terrain of Struggle	20
2.6	Popular, Post, and Neoliberal Feminisms in Digital Culture	22
2.7	Surveillance Capitalism and Data Regimes: Gendered Logics of Extraction	23
2.8	Digital Activism in the Indian Context: Negotiating Access, Risk, and Resistance	24
	Chapter 3: Negotiating Access, Agency, and Vulnerability	26
3.1	Introduction	26
3.2	Universe of the Study	26
3.3	India's digital gender divide	26
3.4	Survey Questions	27
3.5	Summary and Conclusion	32

	Chapter 4: Gendered Digital Lives: Access, Constraint, and the Everyday Negotiation of Power	36
4.1	Introduction	36
4.2	Methodology	36
4.3	Emerging Themes	38
4.4	Textual Analysis	48
4.5	Conclusion	52
	Chapter 5: Negotiated Agency and Digital Constraint	55
5.1	Introduction	55
5.2	Access	56
5.3	Time Spent Online and the Intensification of Self-Regulation	56
5.4	Platform Differentiation and Stratified Participation	56
5.5	Privacy Practices and the Gendered Management of Access	57
5.6	Domestic Surveillance and Conditional Autonomy	57
5.7	Passwords, Secrecy, and Feminist Interpretations of Safety	57
5.8	Time Online, Visibility, and Self-Restriction	57
5.9	Platform Use and Layered Participation	58
5.10	Privacy as Labour, Not Preference	58
5.11	Awareness of Harm and the Ambiguity of Experience	58
5.12	Correlating Harassment with Visibility and Platform Use	58
5.13	Blocking and Reporting as Informal Safety Practices	59
5.14	Structural Design and the Individualisation of Safety	59
5.15	Legal Awareness and Calculated Inaction	59
5.16	Silence, Avoidance, and Strategic Withdrawal	59
5.17	Feminist Interpretation of Statistical Contradiction	60
5.18	Political Expression and the Thresholds of Participation	60
5.19	Correlating Political Expression with Safety and Visibility	60
5.20	Domestic Contexts and the Regulation of Voice	60
5.21	Silence as a Gendered Strategy, Not Absence of Opinion	61
5.22	Platform Design and the Amplification of Risk	61
5.23	Negotiated Agency in the Digital Public Sphere	61
	Chapter 6: Gender, Digital Negotiation, and Feminist Futures	62
6.1	Reframing the Research Problem	62
6.2	Methodological Reflections and Research Challenges	62

6.3	Digital Access and the Illusion of Unqualified Empowerment	62
6.4	Identity, Self-Fashioning, and Impression Management	63
6.5	Digital Spaces as Counterpublics and Sites of Resistance	63
6.6	Harm, Harassment, and the Cost of Visibility	63
6.7	Governance, Law, and Institutional Limits	63
6.8	Recommendations and Future Scope	64
	References	65
	Copyright Declaration Form	74
	Certificate / Approval by Research Guide	75
	About the Authors	76

CHAPTER 1

GENDER, DIGITAL SPACE, AND THE REFASHIONING OF THE SELF

"It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties." (Haraway, 1985)

This research, titled "Gender in Cyberspace: A Study of Refashioning of the Self Among Urban Women," explores how urban women utilise digital spaces to construct and reshape their gender identities and examines the broader implications of these practices on offline gender roles and relationships. Seeking inspiration from digital and cyber feminism, the research explores the modalities employed by women in the digital refashioning of their identities and the role of online platforms as an alternative arena for women to raise gender-related concerns. These platforms no doubt offer tremendous possibilities for self-expression and empowerment, but they are also sites of harassment and breaches of privacy. In Donna Haraway's words, "Technology is not neutral. We are inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We are living in a world of connections, and it matters which ones get made and unmade" (Haraway, 1985). Technology and digital engagement have both the potential to empower and the perils of offline misogyny getting translated and literally transferred by the online.

The research endeavors to delve into an exploration of the manifestations and curation of the 'self' by the young women living in the city of Mumbai as they navigate their way through the nebulous ever-expanding and alluring space offered by the internet to network and refashion themselves and their identities in an attempt to carve out a space for expression of their aspirations and voice. As a faculty of an engineering college for women in Mumbai, the researcher was fascinated by the ways in which mobile phones and other connected devices have become an integral part of the lives of the students, the increased dependency of the students on their smartphones, which all of them invariably own, and the seemingly unlimited access to the internet. Their daily explorations of themselves and life through various social media sites and their attempts at expression of creativity and quest for a voice through the posts, comments and reels made by them fascinated the researcher. For many of the students the most severe punishment a faculty could give would be to stop them from accessing their phones and social media platforms for a day or a few hours. The smart phone surely has become an extension of their physical selves and social media platforms served as virtual break out rooms, a world away from the real immediate surroundings to explore themselves and seek recognition and validation from peers and other likeminded individuals.

The digital in the 21st century has no doubt redefined and is constantly redefining the process of identity formation and self-expression among young women. Through this research the researcher aims to explore the myriad ways employed by young women in Mumbai with access to technology and internet and a decent understanding of the science behind the internet and its operations, to explore and negotiate their identities in cyberspace and to study the blurring of the boundaries created by technology in terms of gender expression and agency. Building on the theories of cyber and digital feminism, this work seeks to explore the complex interplay of self-presentation, representation and discovery in the virtual realm. By using feminist research methods and integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods like in-depth, semi-structured interviews, focus groups discussions and textual analysis, the research endeavors to explore the lived experiences and subjectivities of the participating students to

explore the interesting ways employed by the students to carve out a space for themselves in the online realm by engaging and negotiating with their online and offline personas.

In the 21st century social media platforms play the dual role of mirroring and magnifying social pressures and expectations which in turn play a significant role in shaping the formation of identity and performance. Through the concept of intersectionality, the research explores how gender, class, caste, sexuality, and other related concepts meet in the digital sphere and influence the way women curate and navigate through their online selves. By choosing the city of Mumbai and students of an all-women's engineering college, the research tries to capture and foreground the dynamics of gender and technology at play in this unique cosmopolitan space. Through the findings the research hopes to contribute to nuanced understanding of the influence of digital technologies in shaping the contemporary notions of the self, particularly among women in the suburbs of Mumbai offering insights into the potential of the internet and social media as potential sites of empowerment.

1.1 Navigating the Rise of the Internet Society: Exploring Social-Cultural Dynamics in Virtual Spaces and Their Impact on Young Women in India

The internet, with its great transformative potential of blurring the boundaries between the real and the virtual, is constantly reshaping and redefining modern-day existence. The internet in its wake has ushered in a transformative era, redefining the contours of human interaction, communication, and identity formation. As the use of the internet and smart gadgets proliferate there is a constant blurring between what can be perceived as the 'real' as opposed to and in contrast with the 'virtual'. As the virtual slowly and steadily becomes an integral part of the modern-day reality giving shape to the 'Internet Society' which is playing an important role in reshaping the dynamics of culture and society. The research attempts to explore the complex and intricate interplay between usage of the internet and social media handles in the alluring landscape provided by the internet and the influence it extols on the minds and lives of young women as they navigate through the challenges thrown in by the society and the alluring world virtual realm and refashion themselves.

The Internet is a dynamic space, extremely fluid and volatile in nature characterized by a labyrinth of digital platforms, social media and communities which act as a platform for identity curation, networking and weaving in of new narratives and contesting them too. The internet provides a medium for engaging with different aspects of identity construction, allowing individuals to experience (and even embrace) diffuse notions that defy corporeal embodiment. It is also a site where socio-cultural dynamics and structures of power / privilege interact. Feminist Scholars have long understood the great transformative power of digital in furthering a discourse on equity and equalization and amplifying voices of the marginal. For many young women, the internet offers an alternative platform to express themselves and transcend the shackles of societal norms and expectations. However, the internet is not free and completely devoid of power struggles and imbalances. As rightly expressed by Safiya Noble (Noble, 2018), "Digital technologies are not neutral, they reflect and perpetuate existing social hierarchies." Still for many women the virtual world acts as a canvas for free expression of self, forging new bonds, at time transcending the boundaries of nation and state and building a community of like-minded individuals. Social media for many acts like an outlet to express their innate talent, assert agency and find visibility in a social set up which often tends to invisibilize or silence differing voices.

The power of digital in mobilizing collective action and challenging dominant narratives has always been recognized by feminist scholars. Social media is the tool through which this activism operates. As Bell Hooks once stated: each voice and face despite diversity creates alignment towards a common goal disrupting hegemonic discourses for marginalized voices giving rise to solidarity even among disparate communities (Hooks, 2000 I&V:502.) Young

women in India use digital platforms to campaign for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights and social justice, sparking movements like #lahookarang #whyloiter #righttopee. The virtual space also functions as a canvas to innovate and create, allowing young women to experiment and define themselves beyond standards set by societal norms. "The Internet opens up a varied proliferation of identities and potentials by allowing people to escape their organic locations (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Through blogs, vlogs young women in India have been carving out spaces for self-representation and cultural production, challenging dominant narratives and shaping new discourses.

Yet the glamour of virtual spaces also in its wake brings challenges and dangers inherent to women who have long yearned to negotiate patriarchal standards. The threats of online harassment, cyberbullying and digital surveillance are omnipresent in the lives of young women – limiting their expression, voice or participation in public discourse. Feminist scholars have expressed their concern about the gendered nature of online violence, which particularly affects women and other marginalized groups. According to Anita Sarkeesian, "Online harassment often stems from a cultural problem of misogyny and attempts to silence and intimidate women who have the audacity to speak up" (Sarkeesian, 2015). Across the world, troll armies unleash online abuse — trolling, doxing, revenge porn, stalking or worse — against young women eroding their right to feel safe and free in spaces which ideally should make them feel safe and act as platforms for empowerment.

1.2 Gender and virtual space- Fourth Wave Digital Feminism- Indian Context

The past few decades have witnessed a significant rise in the use of the internet, especially by women. This ubiquitous use of the internet across society has brought in its wake complexities in terms of social and cultural dynamics that play an important role in moulding the lives and life experiences of women in India. On the one hand, social media platforms and the Internet offer tremendous possibilities for self-expression and solidarity building among women for causes and issues related to gender but at the same time the internet is fraught with challenges and risks which can further worsen the inequalities and vulnerabilities that exist in the physical world. Many feminist scholars have critiqued and are raising important questions related to the gendered dimension of interactions and engagement that take place on the internet. They are unequivocally demanding a more inclusive and equal digital future. As more and more women use the internet for personal and professional needs it is imperative that society starts working towards building a more just and empowering digital ecosystem where intersecting forces of power and privilege are kept in check and women can access the internet as a safe space.

Digital technologies in the past few decades have been acting as a catalyst for a paradigm shift in feminist activities. Scholars have called this, Fourth Wave Digital Feminism. The research explores how virtual spaces, in manifold ways, reflect and influence gender identities, experiences, and activism. Virtual spaces increasingly are seen as sites to negotiate and express gender identities, for empowerment, resistance, and unity. "Digital technologies allow people to experiment and transcend the traditional gender norms, opening up new styles of self-representation and community-making" (Balsamo, 1996). Virtual spaces are today's production sites for contemporary culture. Speaking about the Indian context, they provide a platform for voicing opposition towards patriarchal norms and voices of the marginalized.

Fourth Wave Digital Feminism is a continuation and evolution of earlier waves, it has an intersectional approach to social action and gathers its activism using the power of digital technologies. "Fourth Wave Digital Feminism harnesses the potential of social media and online spaces to organize social action, counter hegemonic discourses, and push for gender equality" (Daniels, 2018). In the Indian context for Fourth Wave Digital Feminism has given rise to movements like #MeToo, #IWillGoOut, and #WhyLoiter which foreground issues related to gendered violence, sexual harassment, and body autonomy. Digital spaces provide women in India with the possibility of

undermining hegemonic gender roles and exert agency in a society structured by patriarchy and its norms. Social networking sites allow individual expression, community building, and spread of activism. "Digital technologies provide women with a platform to share their stories, connect with like-minded individuals, and mobilize for social change," Malathi de Alwis (2015). By engaging in online activism and sharing of lived experiences, Indian women defy the mainstream and insist upon recognition of their rights and experiences. However, this promise also presents the ubiquitous threat of online harassment and abuse, especially against women who have the courage to use their voices to speak against gender-based violence and discrimination. According to Anita Sarkeesian, "online harassment is often based in misogyny and seeks to silence and intimidate women who challenge patriarchal norms" (Sarkeesian, 2015). Women in India face online abuse, such as doxing or trolling, which can branch out into threatening violence or sexual assault, this culture of online harassment serves to reinforce already existing power imbalances and silence dissenting voices, thereby perpetuating gender-based violence and discrimination.

The virtual space is not free from traditional stereotypes and biases against gender; instead, algorithmic biases and commercial interests make them worse. According to Noble, "Digital technologies reflect and perpetuate existing social hierarchies, reinforcing gender stereotypes and privileging certain voices and perspectives over others" (2018). Indian social media perpetuates the narrow and idealized prospects of being a woman, beautiful, and successful; in this scenario, the plight of women's low self-esteem and their mental health apparently is terrible. As women continue to find their bearings through the complexities of virtual spaces in India, it is imperative that an intersectional lens be used, taking into account the intersecting axes of identity and oppression defining the experiences of the individuals involved. Kimberlé Crenshaw has argued that "intersectionality allows us to understand how systems of power and privilege intersect and reinforce each other, shaping individuals' experiences in complex and nuanced ways" (Crenshaw, 1989). In an Indian context, intersectional approaches toward digital feminism are necessary because they deal with unique problems faced by women from diverse backgrounds, including Dalit women, LGBTQ, and religious minorities. Virtual spaces need to center the voices and experiences of marginalized communities and advocate for their rights and dignity. As Bell Hooks puts it, "Feminist activism must prioritize the voices and experiences of those most marginalized within society, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for social justice" (Hooks, 2000). In India, organizations like Dalit Women Fight, Nazariya, and Queeristan are some of the forerunners, centering the experiences of marginalized communities and advocating for their rights in virtual space. Virtual spaces are a difficult and ever-shifting ground, identified by multiple systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Although virtual spaces seem to offer new possibilities for the empowerment, resistance, or community formation of individuals, they also tend to reproduce existing inequalities at high risks especially for women in India. Fourth Wave Digital Feminism carries a promise of social change and gender justice to transform the virtual space into more inclusive and fair ground for all by centering voices and experiences of marginalized communities and challenging dominant narratives.

1.3 Gendered Self-Formation of Subjectivity, Agency-Negotiation-Resistance and the Fashioning of the Self Among Urban College Girls

The formation of a gendered self is a very complex and multifaceted process involving the negotiation of social norms, cultural expectations, and individual agency. This study attempts to explore the concept of the gendered self, specifically through the experiences of the students of an engineering college located in the city of Mumbai. Based on the theories of feminist scholarship, this work examines how agency, negotiation, and resistance have complex interplays while shaping the fashioning of the self in young women. Gendered self refers to the ways by which one thinks, communicates, and acts as she or he appropriates and represents the norms and expectations

related to gender. As Judith Butler posits, gender is performative, constituted through repeated acts and behaviors which are culturally and socially mediated (Butler, 1990). Considering the urban college students and their experiences on the internet, the construction of the gendered self occurs within the intersecting fields of peer pressure, the influence of media, their socio-cultural identities, family expectations and representation.

Agency thus has been conceptualized as an essential aspect of one's understanding of self-development toward the gendered self, enabling human beings to act and choose their identities and experiences. As Simone de Beauvoir states that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949). Urban college girl students exercise agency by negotiating the landscape of gender expectations, carving spaces for self-expression, and exploring their identities and offering resistance whenever possible. Negotiation thus plays an important part in the construction of the gendered self that intercedes between internal desires and external pressures, individual aspirations, and societal constraints. As Hooks points out, "Negotiation is a constant process of balancing competing demands and desires, navigating the tensions between conformity and authenticity" (Hooks, 2000). This negotiation of expectations of family, peers, and society allows for competing notions of femininity, success, and autonomy for these urban college girls as they construct their identities within this academic landscape. Resistance is another powerful aspect of the constitution of the gendered self: acts of resistance, subversion, and critique against oppressive gender norms and structures. Self-preservation, as it was phrased by Audre Lorde, is "an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988). The resistance of urban college girls, therefore, is practiced through their styles of dressing, ways of talking and behaving, as well as in the virtual space with regards to the posts, write-ups, and selfies to defy the dominating constructs of gender and assert rights to self-determination within the patriarchal university settings. Indeed, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much" (Adichie, 2012).

Agency manifests both in small acts of expression and little ways of defiance and resistance and in bigger acts of discontent and defiance. Through their choices of clothing, hairstyle, and behaviour, urban college students assert their identities and carve out spaces for self-expression within the campus environment. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments, "Agency resides in the capacity to speak, to act, to make oneself heard and seen" (Spivak, 1988). College students exercise their agency in the context of the urban campus by involving themselves in student organizations, academic pursuits, and social activities, thus making themselves heard amidst the academic discourse. Negotiation is a constant and nuanced process in the formation of the gendered self, involving the reconciliation of internal desires and external pressures, individual aspirations and societal expectations. Negotiation is finding a space for oneself within the constraints of patriarchy, negotiating tensions between conformity and authenticity, according to Bell Hooks (2000). The college students negotiate the expectations of family, peers, and society, grappling with conflicting notions of femininity, success, and autonomy as they navigate the academic, professional and personal terrain.

As Sara Ahmed puts it, "Negotiation is how one calibrates one's practices and actions within the contours of social expectations, while also proclaiming one's difference and self/autonomy" (Ahmed, 2006). These students negotiate the expectations of family and society, seeking to assert their autonomy and pursue their academic and professional goals while also conforming to cultural norms and expectations. Resistance represents a critical aspect of the formation of the gendered self among urban college girls, involving acts of defiance, subversion, and critique directed against oppressive gender norms and structures. As Audre Lorde states, "Your silence will not protect you. We must speak our truths, even in the face of adversity" (Lorde, 1988). Resistance is presented by these students by their choices in clothes, speech, and behavior which reflects their right of self-assertion and expression within the constraints offered by the patriarchal society, restrictions of higher education and their attempt to resist the

dominant narratives of gender. Resistance is manifested in many ways, from lone acts of defiance to collective social movements. As Angela Davis points out, "Resistance is about challenging power imbalances and asserting one's right to self-determination and dignity" (Davis, 1983). Student organizations, advocacy campaigns, and solidarity networks serve as resistance against oppressive gender norms and structures in claiming rights and experience within the academic domain.

The formation of the gendered self among urban college students is a complex and dynamic process shaped by agency, negotiation, and resistance. Through their choices, actions, and advocacy, urban college girls assert their identities, challenge oppressive structures, and advocate for gender justice within the academic landscape. By centering the voices and experiences of urban college girls, we can gain deeper insights into the ways in which gender identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested while paving their way through the internet, with its anonymity and decentralized nature, which serves as a vital tool for marginalized communities to carve out their own spaces and contest the constraints they face offline. By transcending national boundaries, the internet fosters transnational networks and virtual communities, connecting marginalized groups globally. Platforms like social media empower women to shape and express their ethnic and political identities, disseminate information, and mobilize support for their causes, ultimately striving for greater autonomy.

However, the internet's virtual realm also harbors a darker side. While challenging offline inequalities, it often reinforces existing power dynamics. Dominant entities control information production and representation online, shaping conversations and propagating propaganda. Algorithms and filters create echo chambers that perpetuate hate speech and limit exposure to diverse perspectives, blurring the lines between truth and falsehood. Scholars have long tried to comprehend and channel the internet's potential for alternative realities. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* embraces irony and envisions a cyborg as a challenge to gender binaries and power structures. Yet, perspectives on the internet's ability to empower marginalized groups diverge, fueling ongoing debates. Exploring these viewpoints, particularly among youth, is vital for understanding how they navigate cyberspace and reshape their identities. While much research views technology as an escape from reality, cyberfeminism predicted a gender-neutral, utopian digital future. Themes such as the Network Society, Counter Publics, Feminist Standpoint Theory, Cyberculture, and Surveillance Capitalism have shaped the discourse on cyberspace and feminism, illustrating the evolving paradigm of the virtual interface. Understanding these trajectories is essential for comprehending the challenges and opportunities presented by the internet for marginalized groups.

1.4 Feminist Theoretical Positions

Feminist discourse has undergone significant evolution in response to the emergence and proliferation of digital technologies. This research traces the trajectory of feminist theoretical positions, starting from cyberfeminism to digital feminism and fourth-wave feminist movements. It delves into the intersection of neoliberal feminist thoughts, intersectionality, surveillance capitalism, and the rise of the internet society as analyzed by scholars like Manuel Castells and Nancy Fraser. As a concept, cyberfeminism started gaining visibility in the 1990s, representing a significant departure from traditional feminist thought by embracing the transformative potential of digital technologies in challenging established gender norms and hierarchies. At its core, cyberfeminism reimagines the relationship between technology, society, and gender, viewing digital platforms as spaces for subversion and empowerment. One of the seminal figures in cyberfeminist discourse is Donna Haraway, whose influential work, particularly her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," laid the theoretical groundwork for this movement.

The concept of the cyborg according to Haraway serves a radical reconceptualization of identity and embodiment. In her manifesto, she conceives of the cyborg as "a creature in a post-gender world"; that is, a hybrid creature no longer defined by hermaphroditism and now, perhaps, no longer definable by binary structuring either. By blurring the distinction between human and machine, the cyborg disrupts essentialist notions of gender, challenging the binary categorizations that underpin patriarchal societies (Haraway, 1991). The cyborg opens essentially onto a nonbinary structuralism in the forms of reproducing and constructing gender. Haraway provocatively states, "The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (Haraway, 1991). In the heart of the cyborg metaphor is the concept of a "cybernetic organism," in which organic and synthetic elements, human and machine, become integrated into one whole. This would create freedom from the constraints to fixed identity and old power structures. Haraway emphasizes the concept of the cyborg as a new form of being - one of fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance. She remarks, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 1991). Haraway emphasizes the subversive potential of cyborg identity, particularly in its ability to destabilize hierarchical systems of domination. By embracing technology as a tool for emancipation, cyberfeminism challenges conventional feminist narratives that prioritize the body as the locus of oppression. Instead, it celebrates the hybridity and indeterminacy of cyborg subjectivity, rejecting fixed categories in favor of fluid identities. Haraway asserts, "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (Haraway, 1991). Cyberfeminism thus presents itself as a radical break from earlier feminist theory, presenting the reconceptualization of gender and technology as it transcends the binaries of gender and embraces the complexities of contemporary existence. It is through this concentration on the cyborg as a figure of resistance and transformation that scholars like Donna Haraway enable broader possibilities for feminism within a digital age, allowing consideration of the subtle interconnectedness between human and machine and the possibility of freedom within hybrid and fluid constructions. As Haraway proclaims, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (Haraway, 1991).

As the digital landscape evolved and technology became increasingly integrated into everyday life, feminist discourse underwent a significant transformation, shifting its focus to the exploration of online spaces and the inequalities within them. This transition marked the emergence of digital feminism, a multifaceted movement that addresses a wide array of issues ranging from online harassment to digital labor and representation in media. Nancy Baym emphasizes the role of digital media in shaping feminist activism and amplifying marginalized voices. Online harassment and violence against women stand out as pervasive and pressing issues in digital feminism. With the proliferation of social media platforms and digital communication channels, individuals, particularly women and minorities, face unprecedented levels of harassment and abuse online. This phenomenon not only perpetuates gender-based violence but also serves as a barrier to women's participation in digital spaces. Recognizing the urgency of this issue, digital feminists have mobilized efforts to combat online harassment, advocating for safer online environments and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. Digital feminism also offers insights into how digital labor works and its implications for gender equality. In the digital economy, women are often disproportionately represented in low-wage, precarious jobs, such as content moderation and gig work. These forms of digital labor not only perpetuate economic inequalities but also reinforce traditional gender roles and power structures. Digital feminists critique the exploitative nature of digital labor and call for fair wages, labor rights, and workplace protections for all workers, regardless of gender.

Representation in media is another focal point of digital feminist discourse, as online platforms play a significant role in shaping cultural narratives and perceptions of gender. Mainstream media often perpetuates harmful stereotypes and limited portrayals of women, reinforcing narrow beauty standards and patriarchal norms. Digital feminists advocate for diverse and inclusive representations of women in media, challenging stereotypes and

promoting authentic depictions of gender diversity. By harnessing the power of digital media, feminists have created alternative spaces for marginalized voices to be heard and represented. Nancy Baym emphasizes the transformative potential of digital media in advancing feminist agendas and fostering social change. In her book "Personal Connections in the Digital Age," Baym explores the ways in which digital technologies have reshaped interpersonal relationships and facilitated new forms of activism. She notes that digital platforms open avenues for marginalized groups, including women, for associating, organizing, and mobilizing into collective action. Baym notes, "Digital media afford new avenues for people to learn about, discuss, and engage in activism" (Baym, 2010). She emphasizes how the use of online communities and networks gives a voice to the marginalized and ultimately contests dominant discourses. She argues that digital media allow marginalized persons to promote otherwise silenced perspectives and challenge existing power structures.

The fourth wave of feminism emerged in the early 21st century, characterized by its intersectional approach and use of digital tools for activism. Emphasis on inclusivity and recognition of the networked nature of different forms of oppression are the hallmarks of this wave. Intersectionality, as stated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is at the heart of fourth-wave feminism, people can face multiple overlapping axes of discrimination depending on race, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989). Neoliberal feminism's focus on individualism and market-based solutions for gender inequality intersects with digital feminism. It has been criticized over its dependence on corporate interests that ignores the greater good of social change. Scholars like Angela McRobbie argue that it commodifies feminism. Under neoliberal capitalism, empowerment is often associated with consumption (McRobbie, 2009). The concept of intersectionality is an essential aspect of modern feminist thought, in that it establishes the relatedness between social identities and systems of oppression. According to Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality would be easier to understand in order to comprehend differing perceptions of power dynamics because of intersecting forms of privilege and disadvantage (Collins, 1990). This view was challenged by simple notions of gender equality that failed to take into account the marginalized experiences. Digital technologies have fueled the full-blown proliferation of surveillance capitalism, in which personal data is collected and commodified by corporations to generate profit. Shoshana Zuboff warns against dangers from surveillance capitalism, which are discussing implications on privacy and individual autonomy. In feminist theory, surveillance capitalism aggravates all existing power imbalances for the already marginalized communities that are more surveilled and exploited (Zuboff, 2019). Manuel Castells discusses how the internet society can emerge by shaping social relations and power structures through the roles of digital networks. Castells suggests that the internet has both a liberating and an oppressing side, and it depends on how it is governed and used (Castells, 2001). Nancy Fraser further expands this with the suggestion that an internet could be the ground for emancipatory politics as it allows people to decide what purposes it is used for and who is allowed to control it (Fraser, 2008).

1.5 Rationale of the Study

According to Lister et al. (2009, 11) "the virtual world is an elusive domain". And trying to observe the internet and digitally aided and managed spaces is like taking a photo of a wave that is crashing: even though one uses the most speedy cameras in the world, the outcome will be no more than a snap in an endless flow of time, because the element composing the wave are already in movement as the attempt at documentation takes place. The present study aims at exploring the dynamics seen in the virtual world under the lens of gender as the argument posits that the virtual world appears to function as an extension of the real world, in which such indicators of gender persist while taking new and sometimes toxic forms. As Katherine Hayles (2000, 23) has noted, the very notion of seeing information or digital entities such as data or software code in contrast to biological materiality is likely to introduce a problematic split between information and its significance, which will then circumscribe too closely the

scope of theoretical investigation. The ongoing exploration of the impact of digital networks and datafication on culture, subjectivity, and the body reveals a growing understanding that cyberspace is created through a reciprocal relationship between networked data and the human body. The fluidity of digital environments erodes the physical boundaries of the self, resulting in an amplification and extension of our notion and sense of ourselves in connection with other-selves. The attempt is to trace the trajectories of the ways by which urban women use virtual space for exploring, identifying, and self-fashioning their selves as well as examine the effects of these shifts have on their offline lives to understand the influence of technology on the formation of gender identity, agency, solidarity, and voice.

This research attempts to explore a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in the digital age and the challenges faced by young women in the urban setting as they navigate and explore their identity in the online sphere. The rapid integration of technology into our daily lives has had profound implications on the way individuals construct and perform their lives and etch out their identities in both the spheres- real and virtual. While operating through cyberspace, individuals are no longer confined by the physical constraints and social norms that govern their offline lives. However, the virtual world is not without risks for these young women. Urban women and most other women face harassment, cyberbullying, threats, and so on in the online world, which has disastrous emotional and psychological outcomes. They have the freedom to experiment with different aspects of their identity. The digital environment allows for a more fluid and flexible articulation of gender at times, challenging traditional binaries and roles and exploring and inventing newer forms of identity, agency and expressions. However, the digital realm is not without its risks. Urban women, like many others, may face online harassment, cyberbullying, and threats that can have severe emotional and psychological consequences. Understanding the nature and impact of such challenges is vital for developing strategies to combat them. Social media often perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards, leading to issues related to body image and self-esteem. Urban women may feel pressure to conform to these standards, which can have negative consequences for their mental health. As urban women navigate cyberspace, they must contend with issues of online privacy and the potential for their personal information to be misused. Research in this area can inform the development of privacy safeguards and educate individuals about digital security. Urban women's experiences in cyberspace are shaped not only by their gender but also by their caste, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Understanding the intersectionality of identities is essential for developing a nuanced understanding of their experiences. Cyberspace also is unique in that it transcends geographical boundaries, allowing for the exchange of ideas and experiences across cultures. Research on urban women's self-refashioning in cyberspace can provide insights into the global dynamics of gender and technology.

1.6 Research Questions

- What strategies do the urban women use to re-modify their identities while navigating through social media
- How does this online re fashioning of self by urban women influence traditional gender roles and their relationships in offline contexts and the resultant advantage and disadvantages
- How effectively do virtual spaces serve as sites for raising and voicing gender issues

1.7 Objectives

- Examine the ways in which urban women employ digital platforms for constructing and reconstituting gender identities.
- Explore how virtual self-reinvention can influence off-line gender practices and relations
- Assess the degree to which the virtual space may be utilized in order to counter issues related to gender.

1.8 Methodology

In this research, feminist methods are used to explore the refashioning of self among urban college girls along with mixed methods in triangulation form using online surveys for quantitative analysis and focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews along with textual analysis of selected social media sites for qualitative analysis. The reason for using this approach was that while quantitative methods give objectivity and replicability to research, the topic of research is such that it demands approaches that derive from lived experiences, intersectionality, and carving of a counterpublics. Reflexivity is a fundamental tenet of feminist research, which recognizes the subjectivity involved within the process of research and its capacity to influence outcomes.

As Bell Hooks phrases it, "Feminist research is informed by a passion for justice and a commitment to actively promote social change" (hooks, 1994). In contrast to traditional quantitative methods-that, in theory at least-put on a mask of objectivity, feminist research works with reflexivity, hence acknowledging the situatedness of the researcher and what this entails for the research project. This reflexivity is going to definitely ensure further insights concerning the complexities involved in human interaction and dynamic social relationships, which can never be reached by detached objectivity. Crenshaw states that an individual experience has to be comprehended through intersectional forms of oppression and privilege that cut across single-axis frames (Crenshaw, 1989). Embracing intersectionality, feminist research methods concretely explain how different dimensions of identity intersect and shape lived experiences. Centering the experiences of the marginalized affords feminist research methods the strength of combating the reductionism that characterizes quantitative approaches by socially interacting with complexity instead of a seemingly simplified reality.

Intersectionality advocates for a participatory approach towards empowerment of research participants as fellow knowledge co-creators. Patricia Hill Collins, in her seminal work "Black Feminist Thought," highlights the imperative of integrating the perspectives of marginalized communities into research endeavors (Collins, 2000). Through methodologies such as participatory action research and community-based participatory research, feminist scholars strive to amplify the voices of those traditionally marginalized within academic discourse, fostering a collaborative ethos that transcends hierarchical power dynamics. Sandra Harding, a pioneering feminist philosopher of science, contends that the purported objectivity of quantitative research is illusory, often perpetuating androcentric biases (Harding, 1986). Quantitative methodologies, with their emphasis on numerical data and statistical analysis, tend to prioritize quantifiable outcomes at the expense of contextual understanding and lived experiences.

Quantitative methods often tend to ignore the subjective and relational aspects of human experience. As Audre Lorde said, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, 1982). Quantitative approaches, fixated on isolating variables and controlling confounding factors, frequently fail to capture the interconnectedness of social phenomena and the richness of lived realities, thus rendering them inadequate for grappling with the complexities inherent in human existence. Feminist research methods offer an

array of distinct advantages over quantitative approaches, foregrounding reflexivity, intersectionality, and participatory engagement. By centering the perspectives of marginalized individuals and communities, feminist research methods yield insights that are more inclusive, nuanced, and socially relevant. Reflexivity is helpful in questioning the standpoint and bias of the researcher. According to Angela Davis, "Feminist research challenges us to constantly interrogate our own positionality and the ways in which our identities shape our understanding of the world" (Davis, 1983). This reflexivity promotes greater sensitivity about the power dynamics built into the research process; it focuses on ethically sound scholarship that is socially responsible. Intersectionality establishes ways in which interlocking systems of oppression may affect the experience of individuals. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Intersectionality allows us to perceive the complexities of human identity and the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce each other" (Crenshaw, 1989). Centering the voices of subalterns and marginalized communities, feminist research methods unravel the multifaceted nature of social inequality, challenging monolithic narratives that obscure these complexities. Participatory engagement constitutes the core of enabling researchers to become equal and empowered participants in feminist research methods. As Bell Hooks states, "Feminist research seeks to democratize knowledge production by valuing the voices and experiences of those traditionally marginalized or silenced" (hooks, 1994). Through methodologies such as participatory action research and community-based participatory research, feminist scholars attempt to co-create knowledge alongside communities, engendering insights that are both meaningful and transformative. Hence feminist methods have been used in the research to highlight lived experiences of young women and explore the curation and refashioning of selves by them in the online sphere.

1.9 Chapter Scheme

1. Introduction
2. Review of Literature
3. Quantitative Analysis
4. Qualitative and Textual analysis of interviewed students and of select sites
5. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data
6. Conclusion

1.10 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are:

1. The sample includes only students of the engineering college of SNDT Women's University.
2. All the respondents are currently residing in the city of Mumbai
3. The pilot study was conducted on a group of 20 students as few students who were willing to discuss their interaction on the internet openly were handpicked
4. It needs to be mentioned however that the limitations such as gender/location/ proficiency in English language also help to make the sample more homogenous.

1.11 Significance of the Study

The significance of the research lies in its exploration of the intricate interplay between digital technologies and the construction of selfhood among young women in the metropolis of Mumbai. In an age defined by unprecedented connectivity and the omnipresence of the internet, understanding how individuals negotiate their identities within the virtual sphere is important. This research seeks to explore the multifaceted ways in which young women navigate the complexities of the digital age, focusing on the transformative potential of online platforms as both sites of empowerment and sources of surveillance and control. This research emphasizes the profound impact digital technologies have on contemporary notions of identity and self-expression. For young women in Mumbai, the internet and social media platforms represent not only tools for communication and self-presentation but also avenues for exploration, validation, and connection with the wider world. By examining how these women engage with and negotiate their online personas, this research seeks to explore the ways in which digital technologies shape their sense of self and agency. The significance of this research extends beyond the individual level to encompass broader sociocultural dynamics within urban contexts. Mumbai, as a cosmopolitan hub teeming with diversity and complexity, provides an apt backdrop for exploring the intersections of technology and gender. By situating the analysis within this specific socio-cultural milieu, the research aims to uncover the unique dynamics at play within the digital landscape, where traditional notions of self-intersect with rapid technological advancements.

The study contributes to emergent discussions on the social implications of digital technology through the application of identity theories in digital media and feminist approaches to online environments, through which insights are offered into how social media reflects and modifies cultural norms and expectations. Studies of lived experiences and narratives based on the voices of young women relate to enhancing their agency in action and resilience when navigating digital, multi-layered environments. Beyond providing immediate policy and practice recommendations, findings suggest new considerations for education, regulation of technology, and more. Most importantly, the research looks into how digital technologies shape the identity and agency of young women, which could be very important insights that can guide educators, policymakers, or other interested parties in a way that can support bringing in a better quality of life into these urban areas. By delving into the lived experiences of young women navigating the digital landscape, the research sheds light on the transformative potential of the internet as both a tool for empowerment and a site of social control. Through its theoretical insights and practical implications, the research offers valuable contributions to our understanding of the complexities of the digital age and the ways in which individuals construct and negotiate their identities within it.

1.12 Operational Definitions of Key Concepts

1. Agency: Agency can be perceived as the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices, even with constraints. It is the power to make decisions that affect one's life and is often explored in the context of how women navigate and resist societal norms, especially in digital spaces (Butler, 1990; Mahmood, 2005).

2. Counterpublics: Counterpublics are alternative public spheres where marginalized groups, including women, can gather and express their identities, experiences, and resistance to dominant norms. (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

3. Cybercrime: Cybercrime refers to criminal activities that take place online, including hacking, cyber

stalking, identity theft, and online harassment. Feminist perspectives on cybercrime focus on how these crimes affect women, highlighting issues such as online misogyny, doxxing, and revenge porn, and the need for gender-sensitive cyber policies (Citron, 2014).

4. Cyberfeminism: Cyberfeminism as a movement explores the relationship between gender and digital technologies. It advocates for the empowerment of women through the internet and digital tools, challenging the male-dominated technology industry, and envisions a cyberspace that promotes gender equality (Plant, 1997; Haraway, 1985).

5. Digital Feminism: Digital feminism refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to advance feminist causes. It includes online activism, social media campaigns, and digital communities that address issues like gender inequality, violence against women, and body positivity, highlighting the intersection of feminism with digital culture (Baer, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019).

6. Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a concept that explores how various social identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, intersect and create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term to highlight how women of color, for example, experience sexism differently from white women due to the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

7. Refashioning: Refashioning in the context of gender and cyberspace refers to the process of reconstructing or reshaping one's identity, particularly gender identity, through digital platforms. This concept involves how women use online spaces to experiment with and redefine their self-presentation and social roles (Lister et al., 2009).

8. Reflexivity: Reflexivity in feminist research refers to the critical reflection on the researcher's own position and the impact it has on the research process. It involves being aware of how one's own identity, biases, and experiences influence the study and the interpretation of data. (Harding, 1987; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

9. Representation and Presentation: Representation refers to how women are depicted and perceived in digital media, including the stereotypes, images, and narratives that shape public perceptions of gender. Presentation, on the other hand, refers to how individuals, particularly women, choose to present themselves online, including their curated images, profiles, and content, as acts of self-expression and identity formation (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1997).

10. Subjectivity: Subjectivity refers to the ways in which individuals experience themselves as subjects, shaped by their personal, social, and cultural contexts. It involves the internal processes of self-awareness, identity, and consciousness, and is often discussed in relation to how women navigate and resist patriarchal structures (Weedon, 1987).

11. Urban: The term "urban" in the Indian context has evolved beyond just a geographical or demographic marker; it has come to encompass a complex socio-cultural landscape influenced by rapid economic growth, migration, and globalization. Urban areas are steeped in consumer culture, marked by malls, brand-consciousness, and a culture of consumerism that signifies social status. Here, "urban" implies a certain economic status associated with spending power and global connectivity (Deshpande, 2003). Sujata Patel (2006) highlights how urbanisation in India blurs the lines between public and private spheres, especially for women. Urban areas offer new avenues for female labor participation and activism, yet traditional norms around gender often persist, limiting agency. Patel's conceptualization frames the urban not merely as a physical entity but as a socio-political construct deeply

intertwined with historical inequalities, economic processes, and social hierarchies. Her work is instrumental in understanding how the socio-cultural fabric of Indian cities impacts various identities and facilitates spaces for both conformity and resistance.

CHAPTER 2

CYBERSPACE, GENDER, AND POWER:

FEMINIST DEBATES ON NETWORKED LIFE

Early views of the Internet as a place of freedom and equality have now shifted toward more mixed, nuanced critical opinions. What once seemed like a space for unmatched freedom, participation, and creativity is now seen as an economy focused on attention, extraction, and control. (Zuboff, 2019) Phrases like “if it is free, you are the product” have moved from being sharp critiques to routine descriptions of daily online life. Today's digital environments require constant visibility, interaction, and sharing, while users are only valuable to the extent that their data can be collected, analysed, and sold. (Zuboff, 2019) Critics argue that the main purpose of the modern Internet is not communication but extraction. Digital platforms act like attention-hungry systems that turn thoughts, emotions, and physical actions into streams of data. Users are encouraged to engage creatively by posting, sharing, tracking, and reacting, but this engagement is linked to surveillance and profit-driven systems. The user as a productive and independent person exists alongside a more troubling idea: the user as raw material. Online participation is far from neutral; it is tied to capitalist systems that favour certain kinds of visibility, speech, and identity while pushing others to the margins. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152). At the same time, the Internet is still seen as a space of potential, especially for groups historically excluded from mainstream public spheres. Feminist scholars highlight the Internet's ability to support alternative self-expression, community building, and political action. Anonymity, global connections, and easier publishing allow women and other marginalised groups to challenge dominant stories, create counterpublics, and express identities that may be constrained or silenced offline. (Jackson et al., 2016) In this way, cyberspace is seen as a venue for new political ideas and a space where rigid social hierarchies may be disrupted.

These two views, cyberspace as liberating and cyberspace as exploitative, are not opposites. They reflect the complex nature of digital environments. While online spaces can support resistance and agency, they are also influenced by algorithmic control, platform capitalism, and deep-rooted social inequalities. The same systems that support feminist activism and global solidarity can also enable harassment, surveillance, data collection, and the spread of misogynistic and exclusionary messages. (Safecity, 2021) A lack of digital presence, limited access, or failure to express identity in ways that society recognises can make users invisible or marginalised even within supposedly connected spaces. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152)

This chapter explores these tensions by examining theoretical debates on cyberspace, cyberculture, and feminist engagement with digital technologies. It brings together research on network society, counterpublics, feminist standpoint theory, cyberfeminism, and surveillance capitalism to suggest that digital spaces should be seen as contested areas rather than simply liberating or oppressive. It focuses on how power is exercised through visibility, participation, and data, and how gendered identities are influenced, limited, and reshaped within networked environments. This chapter places these discussions within the wider context of the Global South, where issues of access, literacy, caste, class, and gender intertwine in complex ways. Much of the early thinking on cyberspace has come from global north contexts, often generalising from deeply rooted experiences. By highlighting feminist perspectives that consider structural inequality and lived experience, this chapter explores how young women navigate digital spaces in contemporary India.

2.1 Cyberspace and Cyberculture

Communication in the digital age unfolds in internet environments that are neither singular nor stable. Digitally mediated communication has many layers and directions. It hides its complexity behind a facade of immediacy and ease. What seems seamless to users is actually the result of complicated technological, institutional, and algorithmic setups that both enable and limit interaction. To understand cyberspace, we must look beyond optimistic views of connectivity and consider how these spaces are structured, governed, and experienced. Scholars have often said that studying digital environments is challenging because they are always changing. Studying digital media is akin to trying to capture a breaking wave: even the most careful analysis only captures a moment in an ongoing process. Digital media are no longer just tools separate from everyday life; they are woven into its very fabric. (Chatterjee, 2025.) As Couldry and Tacchi argue, digital technologies influence how social relationships are formed, identities are expressed, and power flows. This makes it impossible to view cyberspace as a separate or independent realm. The challenge is not just about definitions but also about how we understand knowledge. Talking about cyberspace means discussing a domain that is both material and symbolic, both infrastructural and imagined. Early descriptions often treated cyberspace as a metaphorical or imaginary space separate from physical social reality. (Stanley, 2001, pp. 77-93) Robbins criticises this view, noting that techno-utopian ideas often imply that digital technologies provide an escape from the frustrations and inequities of the present. Such ideas hide the reality that virtual spaces are closely connected to existing social, economic, and political structures.

Today's digital environments make these distinctions even harder. Cyberspace is no longer just about desktop computers or networked screens. It now includes a growing range of devices, platforms, and systems, such as smartphones, payment apps, fitness trackers, GPS devices, cloud services, QR codes, and algorithmic assistants. These technologies overlap, connect, and continue to generate data, creating a kind of pervasive connectivity that extends beyond conscious interaction. Therefore, cyberspace exists not only in hardware and software but also in imagination, feelings, and everyday practices, influencing how people see themselves and their place in the world. The term "cyberspace" originated in speculative fiction, where it described a disembodied realm accessed through consciousness. (William Gibson, 2024) While this imagery captured the novelty of early networks, its continued use risks creating false divides between the virtual and the real. Contemporary research emphasises that cyberspace is shaped by real practices and representations. It is not a separate area but a web of social relationships, cultural meanings, and technological systems that are continuously negotiated. (Yadav, 2025, pp. 1-10)

Within this framework, cyberculture emerges as a way to think about how people interact with digital technologies. Rather than being a fixed culture, cyberculture is better seen as a dynamic and contested conversation. It includes the histories of technology, narratives about progress and innovation, and everyday experiences of use, resistance, and adaptation. As Bell and others indicate, any discussion of cyberculture must include not only devices and platforms but also the meanings and ideas that accompany them. An important aspect of this analysis is recognising whose experiences are highlighted and whose are overlooked. Narratives about cyberculture often assume a universal "we," sidelining those who struggle with the digital divide. Such assumptions normalise access, literacy, and participation while obscuring inequalities related to gender, class, caste, geography, and language. (Vaidehi et al., 2021). (Imam et al., 2025) Experiential storytelling, as Bell points out, is vital here as it emphasises how users handle the tensions between physical presence and symbolic involvement, connection and fatigue, promise and exhaustion.

Taylor's idea of "living in the gap" captures this complexity. Users are drawn to the exciting promises of interactivity and connection, even as they face overload, surveillance, and dependence. (Zuboff, 2022) Digital life is marked not by escape but by negotiation—balancing the ideals of cyberspace with the everyday realities of use. These

negotiations are uneven, shaped by power dynamics that decide who can engage, on what conditions, and at what expense. This idea is crucial for feminist analyses of cyberspace. By moving away from both technological determinism and blind optimism, we can examine how digital environments uphold social hierarchies while also providing spaces for challenge. Cyberspace and cyberculture, viewed this way, are not neutral backdrops but active grounds where identities are formed, limited, and reshaped.

2.2 The Network Society: Information, Identity, and Power

The idea of the network society offers a crucial way to understand the changes that shape modern digital life. Developed by Manuel Castells, the concept of the network society goes beyond the mere spread of digital technologies. It refers to a fundamental reorganisation of social, economic, and cultural relationships around information networks. (Castells, 1996) Castells argues that these changes arose from the intersection of technological innovation, economic shifts, and social movements in the late twentieth century. This produced a new social structure based on networks instead of hierarchies. Castells emphasises that the information age is not defined solely by technology. Technologies do not act as independent agents of change; they exist within broader social transformation processes. He refers to the current development mode as informationalism, which marks a shift in the source of productivity and power. This shift moves from controlling physical resources to generating, processing, and using knowledge. In the network society, power lies in the ability to shape information flows, connect networks, and manage communication protocols. (Castells, 2000, pp. 3-34)

This shift has major effects on work, the economy, and governance. In the network society, jobs are increasingly organised around projects instead of stable, hierarchical employment structures. Networks work through flexible, horizontal, and mobile arrangements that prioritise adaptability and connectivity. (Castells, 2006) However, this flexibility has a strict binary nature: inclusion or exclusion. Networks do not have inherent values; they operate based on their defined goals. Those who can connect, adapt, and stay useful are included, while others are left out or made redundant. This "on/off" logic creates new types of instability and amplifies existing inequalities.

Castells' analysis also covers identity. In networked environments, identity becomes a main area of struggle and negotiation. He identifies three main types of identity construction: legitimising identities, created by dominant institutions to extend authority; resistance identities, that form among groups marginalised by dominant structures; and project identities, that aim to redefine social roles and transform society. These categories are especially relevant in understanding digital spaces, where working on identity is both encouraged and limited by networked infrastructures. Digital platforms are spaces for what Giddens calls reflexive self-construction, the ongoing process of shaping and reshaping the self. However, in the network society, this reflexivity is affected by visibility rules, algorithmic sorting, and platform economies. The ability to express identity online is uneven and often depends on literacy, cultural capital, and adherence to dominant norms of expression. While networked spaces foster experimentation and diversity, they also pressure individuals to maintain coherence, clarity, and constant visibility. (Basu & Sobande, 2025)

The idea of "networked individualism" further complicates the bond between self and society. Instead of belonging primarily to stable communities, individuals now function as nodes in multiple overlapping networks. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) Social interactions become personalised and private, focusing on "me-centred" networks rather than collective groups. Blogs, social media, podcasts, and other forms of digital self-production allow individuals to share mediated images of themselves, but these practices are heavily influenced by platform logics that value visibility, engagement, and emotional work.

At the structural level, networks consist of flows of information, capital, images, and people. These flows move through nodes that differ in strength and influence. Some nodes act as powerful hubs that attract and direct flows,

while others remain marginal and face constant disruption. Castells' idea of the "space of flows" shows how power is increasingly exercised through the management of circulation rather than control over territory. (Castells, 1996) Global cities, digital platforms, and corporate structures emerge as key nodes where these processes are most evident. Time perception is also altered within the network society. Castells introduces "timeless time" to describe how digital technologies compress, fragment, and rearrange our experience of time. (Castells, 1996) Instantaneity blurs the lines between past, present, and future, creating a perpetual present influenced by real-time updates, archives, and predictive systems. Although most people still follow biological and clock time, timeless time is more prominent among social groups deeply involved in networked flows, especially in finance, media, and governance.

Culture, in this context, is shaped by what Castells calls "real virtuality." Digital media don't create an unreal world; they actually mediate reality. (Castañeda, 2017) Multimedia environments focus on interactivity, personalisation, and customisation, letting users create their own interpretive frameworks or "hypertexts." Meaning-making becomes personal, but it operates within boundaries set by technological designs and economic interests. The abundance of content formats and platforms creates an illusion of choice while often reinforcing dominant narratives and power dynamics. (Jose, 2021) For feminist scholarship, the network society raises important questions about agency, participation, and exclusion. While networks can promote resistance identities and support feminist mobilisation, they also perpetuate structural inequalities through unequal access, algorithmic bias, and surveillance. The same infrastructures enabling women to share counter-narratives also expose them to increased scrutiny, harassment, and data exploitation. Understanding the network society, therefore, requires looking not just at connectivity and flow but also at the power dynamics that determine who benefits from networks and who suffers from them.

2.3 Counterpublics and the Internet: Contestation, Exclusion, and Participation

The idea of counterpublics is important to understanding how marginalised groups interact with and challenge dominant public discourse. Instead of assuming there is just one public sphere, scholars emphasise the many different publics shaped by power, exclusion, and struggle. Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics is especially important here. It highlights how groups that are routinely excluded from mainstream publics create alternative spaces to express their needs, identities, and interests that would otherwise be overlooked or silenced. Fraser develops her ideas by critically engaging with Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Habermas viewed the bourgeois public sphere as a space for rational discussion that linked civil society and the state, ideally allowing for democratic accountability. However, this model is based on assumptions about accessibility, equality, and rationality that obscure the historical exclusions that formed the bourgeois public sphere. Women, working-class men, and other groups without property were mostly left out, making the idea of universal access deeply flawed. (Imam et al., 2025)

Fraser questions the belief that social inequalities can be set aside in favour of political equality. She argues that acting "as if" social hierarchies don't exist helps dominant groups while disadvantaging those who are already marginalised. In stratified societies, achieving participatory fairness is impossible without addressing structural injustice. The rise of counterpublics is not an exception but a natural response to exclusion. These alternative publics serve as places for marginalised groups to regroup and create shared understandings, as well as bases for challenging wider publics. Counterpublics are not automatically liberating. They may broaden the range of discussions by bringing overlooked issues to light, but they can also support exclusionary, anti-democratic, or regressive politics. Fraser's framework allows for investigating how subaltern counterpublics may be used in different ways, including by far-right movements that exploit feelings of marginalisation while reinforcing existing inequalities based on race, gender, and nationality. (Melo, 2025) This complexity is especially relevant in digital spaces, where networked communication enables quick mobilisation without always promoting open or fair norms.

The Internet is often seen as an extension or transformation of the public sphere. Its low entry barriers, global reach, and ability to facilitate horizontal communication seem aligned with democratic ideals of participation and diversity. (Imam et al., 2025) For feminist scholars, digital platforms have opened new paths for forming counterpublics. They allow women and other marginalised groups to share stories, build support, and confront dominant narratives. Online forums, blogs, social media campaigns, and hashtag movements have made forms of visibility and collective action easier to maintain. However, the setup of digital platforms complicates these opportunities. Online spaces do not function as impartial forums for discussion; they are influenced by algorithms, corporate interests, and attention-driven economics. Visibility is unevenly spread, often favouring content that aligns with dominant standards or sparks emotional engagement. (Jain, 2020) Consequently, online counterpublics are susceptible to fragmentation, co-optation, and suppression. The same systems that amplify marginalised voices can also expose them to harassment, surveillance, and coordinated attacks.

Fraser's observation that public spheres are also places for identity formation is especially relevant in digital contexts. (Fraser, n.d.) Public participation goes beyond exchanging arguments; it involves expressing and recognising social identities. Online spaces are not neutral cultural zones; they are shaped by norms of communication, presentation, and interaction that determine who can speak and how they are heard. For women and other marginalised users, participating often means navigating expectations of respectability and emotional effort, alongside risks of being ignored, silenced, or attacked. The variety of publics allowed by the Internet challenges Habermasian ideas of consensus. Rather than moving toward a shared understanding, digital publics often remain divided and antagonistic. (Pratap & Pathak, 2025) This fragmentation reflects wider legitimacy crises within modern democracies, where structural inequalities limit meaningful participation. Counterpublics, therefore, act as both a critique and a symptom: they highlight the exclusions found in dominant publics and reveal the challenges of achieving participatory fairness amid inequality. The deliberative model's focus on how informal opinion formation can turn into legitimate political power becomes less clear in digital environments. While online discussions can shape public agendas, transforming communicative power into administrative power is still uneven and often inaccessible to marginalised groups. (Stromer-Galley, 2014) Furthermore, the rise of counterpublics does not guarantee democratic results. Without structural change, including marginalised voices in discussions may only substitute for the need for actual resource redistribution.

The counterpublic theory provides a critical perspective rather than a simple solution. It brings attention to the power dynamics within public communication and highlights the need to consider who participates, under what conditions, and with what outcomes. When applied to digital spaces, this approach reveals both the liberating potential and the structural limits of online feminist engagement.

2.4 Feminist Standpoint Theory: Knowledge, Location, and Power

Feminist standpoint theory critically examines dominant models of knowledge production, insisting that knowledge is socially situated. Instead of seeing objectivity as neutrality or detachment, standpoint theorists say that knowledge is influenced by power relations, social location, and lived experiences. This view challenges the perceived universality of dominant ways of knowing, revealing how claims to objectivity have historically served the interests of privileged groups. Early versions of standpoint theory arose from feminist critiques of positivist science and liberal humanism. (Borland, n.d.) Scholars like Sandra Harding argue that traditional ways of knowing hide their own biases by presenting male, Western, and elite perspectives as universal norms. Harding's idea of "strong objectivity" reframes objectivity. It becomes not about eliminating perspective but about systematically including marginalised viewpoints. (Harding, 1996) From this angle, knowledge becomes more rigorous, not less, when it considers how power structures inform what can be known and whose experiences matter.

Standpoint theory does not suggest that marginalised groups have automatic access to truth. It highlights that social positioning can lead to critical insights into structures invisible to those who benefit from them. (Intemann, 2020, pp. 295-312) People on the margins often experience social systems from contradictory positions, being inside and outside dominant institutions at the same time. This duality can foster greater awareness of power relations, exclusions, and the contradictions that shape everyday life. This approach has important implications for the study of digital environments. Much of the early thinking about cyberspace assumed a generic user, typically male, Western, and technologically skilled. Such assumptions ignore differences in access, literacy, risk, and vulnerability. Feminist standpoint theory challenges this simplification by emphasising how digital experiences are influenced by gender, class, caste, race, sexuality, and geography. What seems like empowerment or participation from one viewpoint might be seen as exposure, labour, or surveillance from another.

Donna Haraway's work further complicates traditional ideas of knowledge. Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" rejects the idea of disembodied objectivity and the claim that all perspectives are equally valid. (Haraway, 1988, pp. 575-599) She argues that knowledge comes from partial, embodied, and accountable positions. This idea is especially relevant in digital culture, where disembodiment is often assumed but seldom realised. Online interactions are still tied to material bodies, social identities, and power relations, even when filtered through screens and data. Haraway's critique also connects to discussions about visibility and representation in cyberspace. While digital platforms seem to allow flexible identity performance, these performances are judged within normative frameworks that favour some forms of expression and marginalise others. Situated knowledges highlight the costs of visibility and the dangers of being seen, particularly for women and marginalised communities who deal with harassment, appropriation, and surveillance.

Standpoint theory has expanded with intersectional feminist scholarship. Patricia Hill Collins introduces the "matrix of domination" to illustrate how systems of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. (Collins, 1990) From this viewpoint, knowledge from marginalised standpoints is not uniform; it is diverse, shaped by overlapping power structures. Looking at digital spaces through this lens shows how online participation varies, with different groups facing unique challenges and opportunities based on their social positioning. Feminist standpoint theory importantly redefines knowledge as a political practice rather than a neutral one. (Borland, 2023) Choices about what to study, how to frame questions, and whose voices to include are exercises of power. In digital research, this means going beyond platform-centric or technologically deterministic analyses and focusing on everyday practices, emotional labour, silences, and absences. Researchers must also reflect on their own positions, as these influence interpretation and focus. In this work, standpoint theory provides a key methodological and conceptual foundation. Emphasising the experiences and stories of young women, it allows for the analysis of digital spaces not as abstract systems but as lived environments shaped by negotiation, constraints, and agency. This approach matches feminist goals for epistemic justice and sets the stage for exploring cyberfeminist actions that actively engage technology as a site of struggle.

2.5 Cyborgs, Cyberculture, and Cyberfeminism: Technology as Terrain of Struggle

Feminist discussions about technology have long pushed back against simple stories that label digital tools as either entirely freeing or completely oppressive. Cyborg theory and cyberfeminism arise from this pushback. They offer ways to think about how bodies, machines, power, and identity intertwine. Instead of questioning whether technology is good or bad for women, these ideas explore how technological systems are shaped by society and politics and are open to debate. Cyborg theory breaks away from the idea of fixed, defined identities. It challenges binary oppositions like human/machine, nature/culture, and male/female. (Haraway, 1985) Cyborg thinking disrupts rigid views of gender and physical existence. The cyborg acts more as a political metaphor than a literal figure; it

highlights mixture, incompleteness, and contradiction. Feminist theorists use this metaphor to argue that identity in technology-driven societies is always composite, influenced by both physical infrastructure and cultural stories.

In cyberculture, these ideas connect with wider discussions about agency and control. Early cyberfeminist writings often took an ironic, playful approach, celebrating the Internet as a place where gender could be rewritten, expanded, or even made irrelevant. (Paasonen, 2011) Writers like Sadie Plant described digital networks as naturally aligned with feminine values such as diversity, decentralisation, and fluidity. (Plant, 1997) These views positioned women not as latecomers in tech culture but as historically connected to computation, communication, and information. While these contributions were politically bold, critics pointed out that they sometimes overestimated the subversive potential of technology itself. Later feminist scholarship warned against confusing metaphor with real-world impact. The ability to experiment with identity online doesn't erase the structural inequalities present offline, nor does it protect users from abuse, surveillance, or exclusion. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152) Gender may be reshaped in digital spaces, but it is not erased; it often gets reinforced through new forms of governance, visibility, and control.

Cyberfeminism thus shifts from celebration to critique. Later perspectives examine how digital technologies perpetuate patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial power structures, even as they create chances for resistance. (Javed, 2025) Platform design, algorithmic bias, content moderation, and data economies determine whose voices get heard and whose get sidelined. Feminist analysis shows how these systems favour masculine norms of aggression, competitiveness, and productivity while ignoring or undervaluing caregiving, emotional labour, and relationship-building. (Baranov et al., 2025) (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021)

Cyberactivism develops in this context as a collection of strategic practices rather than a united movement. (Samuel et al., 2022) Online feminist activism takes many forms, like hashtag campaigns, digital storytelling, online petitions, counter-mapping, and community archiving. These practices use the features of digital platforms to challenge dominant narratives, mobilise people, and document experiences of injustice. However, cyberactivism is limited by platform rules that prioritise speed, virality, and emotion, often at the cost of sustained political organising. A critique within feminist technology studies highlights the uneven risks associated with digital participation. Visibility, often seen as empowering, carries higher costs for women and marginalised groups. (Karaman-Yilmazgil & Boztosun-Çalışkan, p. 103224) Online abuse, doxxing, reputational damage, and surveillance act as deterrents that limit participation and influence how individuals present themselves. Feminist scholars argue that the expectation to "speak out" online often overlooks the conditions that make silence a rational or necessary choice.

Judy Wajcman's work is particularly relevant here, as it places technology within social power dynamics. Wajcman critiques both the idea that technology shapes society on its own and the belief that people can willfully shape technology, pointing out that technologies are created, used, and governed within gendered institutions. (Wajcman, 2004) From this view, digital tools do not merely reflect society; they actively help produce gender norms and hierarchies. Therefore, feminist intervention must go beyond representation to address design, policy, and governance. Cyberfeminism, understood critically, is not a solid doctrine but a series of ongoing questions. How can we make digital spaces more accountable to vulnerable individuals? What forms of agency are possible amid surveillance and commercialisation? How can feminist politics function when platforms are driven by profit and lack transparency? These questions shift the focus from playing with identity to structural change, from mere access to meaningful participation.

2.6 Popular, Post, and Neoliberal Feminisms in Digital Culture

The growing presence of feminist language in digital spaces has sparked important discussions about which forms of feminism are being highlighted, for whom, and for what purpose. Online platforms have allowed feminist ideas to spread widely. However, they have also turned these ideas into market-friendly messages focused on individual empowerment, self-promotion, and consumption. Popular feminism describes the mainstreaming of feminist symbols, slogans, and styles through mass media and social platforms. Feminism, which was once seen as oppositional and disruptive, is now often portrayed as aspirational, trendy, and universally attainable. Digital platforms are crucial to this change, favouring forms of feminist expression that are visually striking, emotionally engaging, and easily shareable. Hashtags, memes, and influencer-driven content communicate feminist messages that lack historical context and structural analysis, leading to a version of feminism that appears recognisable yet is politically weakened. (Poornimadarshini, 2025, pp. 25-30)

Postfeminist discourse further complicates this landscape. Postfeminism is not just a time frame that follows feminism; it reflects a mindset in which people assume gender equality is largely achieved. (Lewis et al., 2017, pp. 213-225) In this context, feminism is redefined as a personal choice rather than a collective struggle. Women are seen as independent individuals who select empowerment through consumption, self-improvement, and visibility. Structural inequalities are minimised, while success or failure is viewed as an individual responsibility. Rosalind Gill's work is insightful for understanding this shift. Gill describes postfeminism as a cultural logic woven into media portrayals, where empowerment is linked to confidence, sexual agency, and entrepreneurial selfhood. (Gill, 2007, pp. 147-166) Digital culture enhances these dynamics by promoting continuous self-surveillance and self-optimisation. Metrics like likes, followers, and engagement act as unofficial assessments of worth, tying feminist self-expression to neoliberal ideals of productivity and competition. (Beck, 2021) (Saraswati, n.d.)

Neoliberal feminism takes this idea further by explicitly connecting feminist values with market principles. Empowerment is defined in terms of individual resilience, leadership, and ambition, often disconnected from issues of redistribution or community care. (Ferri, 2026) Digital platforms celebrate women who skillfully navigate uncertainty through personal branding, hustle culture, and adaptability. Structural obstacles—such as unpaid care work, digital harassment, and unequal access—are reframed as obstacles to be surpassed through mindset and effort. (Heeks, 2021)

This reshaping of feminism has major consequences for how we view agency. Agency is increasingly linked to visibility and voice, while silence or withdrawal is seen as passivity or failure. Such viewpoints overlook the uneven risks associated with digital participation. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152) For many women, especially those from marginalised groups, visibility can lead to surveillance, harassment, and damage to their reputation. The pressure to “speak up” thus becomes a demand that enforces discipline rather than an opportunity for liberation. Critics argue that neoliberal feminism removes the political dimensions of gender inequality by turning systemic issues into personal challenges. (Bennett, 2024) Online campaigns that promote confidence, self-love, or entrepreneurial success often exist alongside platforms that benefit from misogyny, data exploitation, and unstable labour. Feminist language is integrated into advertising, corporate branding, and platform governance without confronting the systems that create inequality. Consequently, feminism risks being reduced to a style or attitude rather than a genuine political movement.

However, it would be overly simplistic to completely dismiss popular digital feminism. Online environments still provide space for critical feminist voices that challenge mainstream narratives, expose violence, and foster solidarity. The real tension arises from the uneven visibility of these voices and their susceptibility to co-optation. Platform algorithms tend to prioritise content that fits within prevailing norms of positivity, approachability, and consumption, often sidelining feminist critiques that emphasise anger, structural injustice, or refusal. Even though

feminism seems more visible online, its political impact is shaped by the economic and technological factors that shape its circulation. Understanding popular, post, and neoliberal feminisms requires looking closely not only at what is voiced but also at how it is featured, monetised, and governed.

2.7 Surveillance Capitalism and Data Regimes: Gendered Logics of Extraction

The consolidation of digital platforms has created an economic system in which data serves as a primary resource for profit and governance. This shift is best explained by the concept of surveillance capitalism, which refers to systems that collect, analyse, and profit from behavioural data generated by everyday digital activities. (Zuboff, 2019) Instead of seeing data collection as a secondary outcome of providing services, surveillance capitalism places data extraction at the centre of today's digital world. Shoshana Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism turns human experiences into behavioural surplus. This surplus consists of data that goes beyond what is needed to provide a service. Instead, it is used to predict and shape future behavior. (Zuboff, 2019) Digital platforms track clicks, movements, preferences, biometric signals, and emotional responses. They convert this information into predictive products sold to advertisers, insurers, political actors, and other institutional clients. In this system, power not only comes from knowing users but also from influencing the conditions under which choices are made. This setup significantly changes what autonomy and consent mean. Engaging in digital life now often requires accepting unclear data practices that are hard to understand and nearly impossible to reject. Consent is formalised through lengthy terms-of-service agreements, which serve more as tools for legitimising these practices than as ethical protections. (Grover et al., 2025) Users appear to have freedom, yet they face structural constraints that force them to give up privacy to participate in social, educational, and economic activities.

Surveillance capitalism also transforms governance. Data-driven systems establish regulations that rely on prediction, nudging, and automated decision-making instead of overt control. Algorithms categorise users based on risk, value, and desirability, influencing access to resources and opportunities. These classifications are not neutral; they draw on historical data that reflect social biases, thereby reinforcing inequalities along lines of gender, race, class, caste, and geography. Feminist scholars argue that algorithmic governance often strengthens existing hierarchies while hiding accountability behind technical complexity. From a gender perspective, surveillance capitalism heightens the demand for visibility while punishing those who are seen. Women are encouraged to engage online as consumers, creators, and influencers. However, their involvement generates data that exposes them to greater scrutiny, harassment, and control. (Pandey, 2025, pp. 897-901) The undervalued work of care, communication, and emotional support becomes more profitable when it is turned into data streams. Emotional expression, social interaction, and self-disclosure are monetised without proper recognition or protection. (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022)

The personal nature of data collection blurs the lines between public and private. Devices and applications designed for convenience—such as health trackers, location services, smart assistants, and educational platforms—extend surveillance into the home and physical spaces. Feminist critiques point out that such technologies disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to use digital systems for caregiving, health management, and emotional work. (Aparicio et al., 2025) These interactions create detailed data that can be reused for commercial or disciplinary purposes. Critically, surveillance capitalism does not function the same way everywhere. In the Global South, data systems intersect with uneven access, informal economies, and weak regulatory structures. Digital inclusion efforts often focus on connectivity rather than rights, portraying access as empowerment while neglecting issues of data sovereignty and exploitation. For women, digital participation can bring new opportunities for visibility and mobility, but it also increases vulnerability to surveillance from families, communities, corporations, and the state. (Pandey, 2025, pp. 897-901) (Isser et al., 2024) Resistance to

surveillance capitalism is complicated. While users may develop strategies to obscure their actions, refuse participation, or engage selectively, the power imbalance between platforms and individuals limits the effectiveness of personal actions. (Pandey, 2025, pp. 897-901) Feminist responses stress the importance of collective strategies that tackle design, regulation, and governance. Questions about who owns data, how algorithms are audited, and whose interests are prioritised are crucial to feminist politics in the digital era. (Sambasivan et al., 2021)

2.8 Digital Activism in the Indian Context: Negotiating Access, Risk, and Resistance

Digital activism in India must be understood in a social and political context marked by significant inequalities along lines of gender, caste, class, religion, language, and region. (Menšíková, 2024) The growth of mobile connectivity and social media has created new opportunities for participation and mobilisation. However, these advancements exist alongside uneven access, digital illiteracy, and increased surveillance. (Imam et al., 2025) Thus, digital activism in India is less about straightforward empowerment and more about ongoing negotiation between visibility and vulnerability, expression and control. For many women, digital platforms provide new ways to share experiences of discrimination, violence, and exclusion that mainstream media and institutions have often ignored. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152) Online campaigns, sharing personal stories, and feminist storytelling have allowed issues like sexual harassment, caste-based violence, and everyday misogyny to become part of public discussions. These efforts challenge dominant narratives by focusing on lived experiences and emotions, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers.

However, digital activism in India also takes place in risky conditions. Being visible online often leads to harassment, moral policing, and organised abuse, especially for women who challenge established gender norms or political views. (Lal et al., 2024, pp. 1-14) The fear of doxxing, damage to reputation, and physical retaliation influences how women choose to participate. For many, using anonymity or partial visibility becomes a strategic option instead of a limitation, complicating the common belief that having a voice means being empowered. The intersection of digital platforms with caste and class creates different experiences for activists. English-speaking, urban, middle-class feminist discussions often gain more visibility, while voices from rural areas or those from marginalised castes stay underrepresented. Algorithms, content moderation, and media promotion usually favour certain types of speech and expression, perpetuating existing hierarchies even in spaces that claim to be democratic. (Noble, 2018) Thus, feminist digital activism in India reflects internal tensions around representation, leadership, and agenda-setting.

State power significantly influences how digital activism develops. Stricter regulations on online speech, surveillance, and internet shutdowns limit dissent. (J. & S., 2025, pp. 2033-2047) Digital spaces are monitored not just by corporate platforms but also by state and non-state actors, creating an environment where participation is closely controlled. For women activists, this surveillance often intersects with family, community, and institutional restrictions on their mobility and expression. (Imam et al., 2025, 2024) Despite these challenges, digital activism in India shows impressive adaptability. Feminist efforts often employ mixed strategies that combine online mobilisation with offline organising, legal work, and community action. Instead of focusing only on visibility or going viral, many initiatives emphasise documentation, mutual support, and gradual forms of resistance that push back against platform demands. These practices challenge the idea that success in digital spaces should only be measured by size or speed. Digital activism in India cannot be simplified to crises or viral moments. It also includes daily acts of negotiation, choices about what to share, when to speak up, and how to stay safe. From a feminist perspective, these small actions hold political significance. They show how people exercise agency under pressure and how digital involvement is shaped by broader structural conditions rather than just personal choice.

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations needed to analyse gendered experiences in digital life. It moves from discussions about cyberspace and cyberculture to critical examinations of network society, counterpublics, feminist standpoint theory, cyberfeminism, neoliberal feminism, surveillance capitalism, and digital activism in India. The chapter argues against viewing digital spaces as either entirely freeing or entirely oppressive. Instead of seeing cyberspace as purely liberating or oppressive, the chapter shows that digital environments are filled with contradictions. They allow participation, self-expression, and political action while also functioning under systems of extraction, surveillance, and control. Power in these networked spaces comes from visibility, data, and algorithmic governance, which dictate who can speak, how they are heard, and at what cost.

Feminist theoretical frameworks are particularly important for highlighting these dynamics. By focusing on social location, lived experience, and structural inequality, feminist scholarship questions broad claims about digital participation. It emphasises the need to investigate whose interests technological systems really serve. Concepts like counterpublics, situated knowledges, and surveillance capitalism illustrate how gendered individuals navigate digital spaces with unequal power. In the Indian context, these issues become even more pressing. Questions of access, language, caste, and safety significantly impact digital participation, especially for young women. Digital spaces are places where agency is negotiated, not assumed, and where silence, anonymity, or partial visibility can serve as strategic reactions to risk. Feminist interventions must address both opportunities and limitations. The theoretical insights presented serve as the analytical base for the following chapters, which will explore how young women experience, interpret, and navigate digital self-expression in today's data-driven environment.

CHAPTER 3

NEGOTIATING ACCESS, AGENCY, AND VULNERABILITY

3.1 Introduction

To understand the use, impact and proliferation of the internet among young women and the ways used by them to navigate the terrain to gain voice, agency and control over their lives in an attempt to refashion it an exploratory design and mixed methods were used. An online survey was first designed using Google Forms and administered to a group of students, followed by focus group discussions and in-person interviews. 304 students responded to the survey. The survey was conducted in May 2022. The consent of all the respondents was sought before they answered the survey. The survey questions were both closed- and open-ended, with the option for multiple responses. Mumbai, Maharashtra, was selected as the study location.

3.2 Universe of the Study

Undergraduate students who identify as women and have a fair understanding of technology and its operations constitute the study's universe. Their educational training and social, cultural, and financial capital make it easy for a sizable number of the population to access technology, electronic gadgets, and the internet. Data about their awareness, experiences, representation and victimisation, or optimum utilisation of the online sphere, is still not part of any research literature. These women are also significant and future creators and consumers not just of technology and related mediation but also will be part of the workforce creating future technology and applications which will impact human society. Mumbai is the universe for the present study. However, some of the participants would have come to Mumbai from different parts of the country especially from different pockets of Maharashtra from urban, semi-urban and rural districts. Since only quantitative or only qualitative design would not suffice the understanding about the complex nature of operation of gender in cyberspace experienced by women, the study initially explored the experiences of women in the cyberspace through their lived experiences followed by a through textual analysis of nature of representation and use of cyberspace among women and other agencies.

3.3 India's Digital Gender Divide

The digital gender divide refers to gender differences in resources and capabilities to effectively utilise ICT, which amount to gender gaps in the access and use of digital technologies, digital skills, and digital finance (OECD, 2018). These gaps widen due to non-technological barriers such as inadequate economic resources, lack of training, and socio-cultural norms regarding women's roles and place in society. Gender gaps in digital inclusion consequently spill over into gender inequalities in the labour and financial markets, which further put women at a disadvantage. Moreover, even as young women attend educational institutions, they do not enter (or are not allowed to enter) the labour force once they reach marriageable age, which might indicate either the non-availability of adequate opportunities (Chatterjee et al., 2015) or the greater involvement of women in unpaid household work, or adherence to social and cultural norms (Eswaran et al., 2013; Choudhuri, 2021).

Data from the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) (2023) and Oxfam (2022) help put together a broad picture of women's access and usage of the internet in India. GSMA data show that even as the gender gap in mobile ownership narrowed to 11% in 2022 from the previous year, mobile internet adoption among women remained at 30%, further widening the gender gap to 40%. Further, mobile internet awareness among women has still not surpassed 60%. The gender divide with regard to digital skills is also stark, with only 30% of

women knowing how to use the internet to find necessary information, operate mobile money or access apps and e-services (GSMA, 2023, Oxfam, 2022). The fact that many Indian women use less sophisticated handsets means they are 33% less likely than men to use mobile internet, with applications limited to a smaller range of digital services, primarily voice and SMS (Oxfam, 2022).

However, these challenges are largely overlooked in the 'Digital India' initiative, launched by the Government of India in 2014. The programme document does not specify any explicit gender-disaggregated training targets for bridging the digital divide, given the lower uptake of internet usage among Indian women (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2018). It also fails to recognise that women's rate of internet usage may not increase in tandem with the national deployment of digital technologies: the lack of digital literacy and skills to capitalise on the benefits of participating in the information economy further widens the existing divide.

3.4 Survey Questions

The survey explored the following questions:

Demographics:

This section of the survey aimed to explore the correlation between the age of the respondent with smartphone ownership and the average amount of data used per month. It also tried to locate the relation between the geographical location (urban/rural/semi-urban), smartphone ownership, in terms of access and whether it had any relation to the family income of the respondents which was further linked with the type of house the respondent resided in and the relationship between the number of hours spent on social media and various demographic factors?

Access to Technology:

This section was designed to explore what proportion of respondents have access to both laptops as well as smart phones and other devices used to access the internet from and their preference for shared or personal devices. It also explored how data pack availability and usage vary among respondents and the types of connections do respondents predominantly have on social media.

Awareness of Rights as a Citizen:

This section of questions explored the awareness of the participants towards existing cyber laws and protocols, types of cybercrime and the vulnerability of women, LGBTQI and other minority groups to cyber-crime and violence. It also explored the participants' views on privacy settings, security issues and sharing of personal information on social media platforms. The awareness of the respondents of the redressal mechanisms related to cyberbullying, crime and harassment was also explored.

Usage Patterns and Reasons:

This section explored the various reasons for which respondents used social media platforms, and the percentage of Fear of Missing Out - FOMO, experienced by them. Whether social media use made the respondents feel empowered and the kind of restrictions faced by them while using social media platforms, especially related to family. The section also explored the content of the social media posts shared by the respondents, the sexual

harassment or gender-based harassment faced by the respondents on social media platforms, the types of harassment faced by them and the actions taken by them.

Participation in Online Movements:

The final section of the survey explored the participation of the respondents in online movements and the support extended by them to social and other causes on social media. If they have ever reported someone for their actions on social media and their experience as part of an online campaign for a social cause.

The survey was conducted online using google docs. The method used to collect the sample was snowballing. The questions of the survey were designed by taking into consideration the following broad categories - demographics, access to technology, reason for access technology and the internet, especially social media platforms, awareness about cybercrimes, redressal mechanisms and socially relevant issues and participation in social issues on the internet.

Out of the 304 respondents of the study, 53.6% belonged to the open category, 23.7% to the Other Backwards Caste (OBC), 10.5 to the Scheduled Caste, 7.9% VJ/NT, 3.3% SBC, 0.5 % Scheduled Tribe and 0.3 to the Economically Weaker Section. It is interesting to note that the largest number of respondents to the survey belonged to the open category, with OBC following as a close second, which clearly indicates that social mobility is directly proportional to access. The next question, to ascertain the respondents' demographics, concerned the religious groups the participants identify with. As per the responses, the majority of the respondents identified themselves as Hindu (87.5%), with 6.6% of participants identifying themselves as Muslims, 3.3 % as Buddhists.

It was considered important to examine the respondents' financial backgrounds. So the question related to the monthly income of the family, which revealed that only two respondents had a monthly income of less than 10 thousand rupees per month, the majority of the participants came from families with a monthly income between 20 to 50 thousand rupees per month, and many participants came from families which had a monthly income of more than 3 lakhs per month. Establishing the fact that access to technology is still an upper-class phenomenon in a country.

Out of the respondents, majority of the respondents lived in a house owned by the family (66.1%), while 23.4% lived in a rented house, 3.9% were staying in a hostel, 3.3% as paying guests (as the students studying in the college which was the Universe of the survey come from all over the country but are current residing in Maharashtra for completing their 4-year degree course in Engineering). 2.8% of the participants live in company quarters, while 0.7% live in their grandparents' house.

Interestingly, 99.7% of participants owned a smartphone, while only one said she did not. Similarly, all the respondents except one agreed that having a good data pack that allows them to access the internet daily is important. The majority of respondents also have Wi-Fi at home (67.5%), while 32.6% do not have access to Wi-Fi at home, and one respondent did not respond to this question. While 62.5% of respondents shared their devices with family members in some way, 37.2% did not, and 1 did not respond.

This question was followed by an open-ended question about the reasons for having a password. At the same time, a majority of the respondents said that the reason why they have a password is for the safety and security of their device, a few were bothered about, "When I give my phone to some people for working stuff, they scroll to see everything", or "there are some things about myself that I am not ready to share with my family yet. "The phone is

like my inside life, and the password helps in keeping privacy. I may be open with my friends, but." "My friends may misuse my phone without my permission. (College is the reason)"

For the question on whether the family members have access to phones, there were interesting responses, as it was an open-ended question. While 63.8% of the respondents said that their family had access, a few said that access was limited to only a few family members and explained why they want to use the device.

It is interesting to note that many young people are very possessive of their mobile devices. Regarding whether they have a password on their phone, 85.9% agreed they do, while 13.8% said they do not. The monthly expenditure on the data pack is also interesting to note: 69.4% of respondents spend about 200 Rupees per month on data, 16.8% spend more than 500 Rupees, 9.9% spend less than 100 Rupees, and 3.3% spend less than 50 Rupees. At the current rate, Rs 500 provides more than 3 GB of data per month. Notably, about 65% of respondents spend 5 hours on the Internet. In comparison, about 25% spend about 10 hours, which is a considerable amount of time, given that students spend about 8 hours in college, so a significant amount of their time after college hours is spent on accessing the internet, especially social media.

To the question of whether they experienced fear of missing out or FOMO when they did not have access to the internet, 45% said no, 40% sometimes and less than 10% admitted to experiencing FOMO, which is a direct contradiction to most of the respondents using it for more than 5 hours a day. Perhaps the respondents are not being truthful or are not willing to accept the fact that access to the internet has perhaps become a necessity to most of them, almost bordering on addiction. Since this question needed further exploration, it was examined during the semi-structured interview conducted as part of the study. The first two parts of the survey were designed to explore demographics and the reasons for using social media. The responses indicate a direct correlation between class mobility and access to data packs and smartphone usage.

The next section of the survey was based on exploring the respondents' social and political selves and the reasons for using social media. To the question on whether the respondents were members of groups which worked on social issues, a large number of respondents responded with a No (63.5%), 33.9% responded saying that they were part of such groups, while 1 respondent said sometimes, and 1 respondent said she liked to read about these issues but was never part of them. This makes us think about the arguments made by Bell Hooks and Catherine Rottenberg, where they introduce the concepts of "Lifestyle Feminism" and "Neoliberal Feel-Good Feminism". Bell Hooks in her book, 'Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics.' (Hooks 2000), draws a distinction between reformist thinkers and revolutionary thinkers. Reformists who emphasise gender equality and work within the existing structures, and Revolutionary/visionary thinkers, who want to do away with the patriarchal superstructure entirely. Used as a tool for class mobility, reformist feminism can lead to fellow women trampling on other women to acquire higher societal standing. Thus, allowing these women to lead double lives where they get to choose their roles as oppressors and oppressed while living comfortably within the existing sexist structure. This is what Hooks calls "lifestyle feminism," or the idea that no matter your politics, you could still be a feminist (e.g., an anti-abortionist could still be a feminist). Lifestyle feminism allows for the removal of politics from a fundamentally political and radical movement. The responses to the survey make one feel that perhaps Hooks is making a point as most of the young women respondent's desire freedom of choice and desire a life of equality without being actively involved in the movement or calling themselves feminist. There is also a fear of making the personal political or removal of politics from the movement, which leads to the question is it even possible to have a women's movement without politics or is there a possibility of systemic structural changes without politics.

In her critique, Rottenberg highlights the concerning trend of commodifying women's issues and the subsequent branding by corporations, a practice commonly referred to as "brand activism." This approach involves companies attempting to enhance their reputation by associating themselves with popular and often progressive causes in their PR and advertising campaigns. While some may argue that such initiatives contribute positively, it is essential to examine the underlying objectives and consequences of these actions. An example of this kind of activism could be many companies announcing limited edition items for Women's Day in collaboration with actors, singers for other influencers. While, they claim that the profits for the sale of these items are donated to charity and used for the cause of women's empowerment, it is important to ask how empowerment can be equated with purchasing a certain merchandise. The attempt seems to be more inclined towards coaxing women to express solidarity through consumerism and not thorough meaningful struggle. A significant number of respondents did not want to directly associate themselves with social causes or movements, but were eager supporters of equality and did not mind leaning in without causing major social upheavals in their lives or society. The respondents who have associated with movements or causes on social media have shared concerns under the hashtags #METOO and #BlackLivesMatter, along with participating in efforts to raise voices to conduct online exams after the pandemic and to collect funds to help patients who did not have access to medication during COVID. To the question on whether the respondents have experienced any restrictions on the use of social media. A significant percentage, 64.5% respondents answered saying no, they haven't experienced any restrictions, while 17.6% agreed that they have faced restrictions, 16.1% have faced it sometimes.

What is interesting is that 20.7 % of the respondents agreed to have multiple social media accounts and the reason for having these accounts were as varied as "I have another account which is basically a private account for me where all of them are closed ones and basically an account where I just put whatever I like to post. Maybe some ugly photos, some words, thoughts and memes. Basically, my daily life rather than sharing it with someone specific on chat I post there and tell my whole group of close friends through it. Basically, to avoid being judged by my 500+ followers on my main account. So yeah it can be said the 500+ followers is a ""pretentious"" account." or "To show a few things to only a few people", "I follow K-pop so one of my accounts is just dedicated towards them, even though I start it with the thought of ""freely"" (without being judged) commenting on and sharing their content. But it ended up becoming a fan page having a good growth. (K-pop and K-drama fans are judged for a lot of things on social media especially Instagram and Twitter, by saying that they look like girls and boys don't put make up and they get a lot of hate for the same reason which is basically stupid.)" The reason for having multiple or a personal and an official account to have multiple representations of the self. One is a personal self which could share what they wanted to share in the nebulous, anonymous social media and online platforms offered and the next, the public self, which confirmed and adhered to the acceptable standard of society and peer groups.

The next set of questions was based on experience using social media. To the question on whether they have experienced sexual harassment on social media, the majority of the respondents 71.4% replied in the negative, 8.6% agreed to have faced sexual harassment and 8.9% said not sure and sometimes 2.3% not responding to the question which reinstates the idea that many women are not aware of what constitutes as sexual harassment. To the question on whether you feel women and other marginalised groups are more vulnerable to cybercrime 28.3% of respondents replied in the affirmative while 35.9% said maybe, 26.3 % said no. This reiterates the fact that the majority of the respondents are not aware of cybercrime and the multifarious ways in which one is exposed to cyber crime or are just not willing to accept that they have been subject to cybercrime or gender-based violence

Even more unexpected was the response of the participants to the question on whether they have received explicit content on social media, 67.4% replied that they have never received any such content while 17.4% agreed to

have received sexually explicit content 10.5 said maybe. This while every second joke even on family groups are full of sexual innuendos and there are many pop-ups with sexually explicit content and overtures from men who want to befriend women on social media. In fact, sexting being very common on WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat and dating and gaming sites.

The contradiction being that 67.4% of respondents have never received any sexually explicit content but 51.3 % claim to have reported people on social media. What have they reported them for if not for cybercrime and sexually explicit content. 53.3 % of respondents say that they are aware of cyber laws and 39.1% say that they are not aware of existing cyber laws. To the question of whether they have ever visited the cyber crime website. 71.7% said no, 20.7% said yes, 1 person said once, 1 person said sometimes and 1 person said that she found the site boring so never visited again. But 87.8% of the respondents feel that awareness about cyber crime is necessary.

The responses to the open-ended questions on harassment and gender-based discrimination faced on social media brought out distressing details of emotional and verbal abuse directed towards the respondents. The responses spoke of accounts being hacked, privacy being breached and them receiving sexually explicit content from stark strangers, these incidents left an indelible emotional mark on the psyche of these young women.

To quote a few such experiences: "I once got a message from some random person saying that he was my boyfriend and now I was dating someone else so I cheated on him. So, he harassed me by saying a lot of swears in Hindi and even a lot of vulgar words which are very romantic for people who are in a relationship but coming from a person who I have never or neither had any contact with was creepy and disturbing so I blocked him."

Example 2- "Back in high school boys harassed me and commented rude things on all my pictures. They also DMed me and said things about my body and face in a sexual manner."

Example 3- "Men sexualize me in my comment section and harass me by repeatedly texting and calling through direct messages or after being blocked they would create new accounts just to find me again and continue the same behavior. My account has been hacked and my identity misused and impersonated by a hacker on social media platforms."

These responses indicate the extreme nature of online harassment and the impact it can have on young minds. The fact that social media and the internet gives perpetrators a certain degree of anonymity seems to embolden them to make vitriolic and sexually explicit comments. The anonymity also makes it difficult for women to complain and seek redressal as the enemy is a nameless faceless entity. These perpetrators also use Direct messaging to share sexually explicit images and forward unwarranted messages. The open-ended question on marginalized groups being specifically targeted on social media elicited many heartfelt responses. These responses shed light on the intersectionality of online abuse, affecting individuals based on gender, sexuality, and other identity markers.

Social media is like a double-edged sword, it can act as a platform for self-expression but we cannot ignore the fact that it is also an area where hate and vitriol is spewed openly especially against content creators who often face the brunt of online vitriol. One of the respondents who is also an online content creator and influences shared her experiences: her dressing sense and bold dance moves attracted a lot of hatred and abusive comments against her, her family and upbringing. She is hurled sexist abuses and is constantly slut shamed which has led to many of her family and friends ostracising her and questioning her choices. She has been advised by many to stop creating online content yet she tries to deal with all this negativity and continues her pursuit of exploring herself

and her love for fashion and dance. Her experiences raise many important questions about freedom of expression on the internet and the existing cyber laws and their efficacy in dealing with such cases.

Should an 18-year-old go through so much stress and vitriol for expressing herself on social media? How does this hate and abuse affect her mentally and impact her well-being? Are there enough laws to protect her from potential online and offline attacks? Is surveillance the answer? Can more stringent laws be the solution? It is imperative the questions related to gender and freedom of expression in the online real require a earnest revisiting.

The responses to the open-ended questions reveal the extreme angst and discrimination encountered by some of the respondents on social media platforms by the opposite sex and by people who taking advantage of the guise of anonymity offered by social media say things that cause immense emotional and psychological distress to the respondents. Though most of them learn to ignore these comments, walking and trolling, many report and bring to law some of the offenders. Many are scarred for life and find it difficult to trust connections made on the internet. All of this points to the pertinent need for awareness about what constitutes cyber crime and educating people about netiquettes so that the misogyny of the real world does not get passed on to the virtual.

3.5 Summary and Conclusion

The survey attempted to explore the nuances of experiences accumulated by women in the urban set up with access to smart devices and internet and having an understanding of the travails and perils of the internet as well as the immense possibilities for exploration and growth.

Demographics:

a. How does age correlate with smartphone ownership and data pack amount?

The study reveals that age and smartphone ownership have little or no correlation with the majority of the respondents having access as well as ownership of not just smart phones but multiple devices as most urban homes do not share devices especially smartphones. Access to the internet as well as data packs was also substantial as the majority of the respondents belonged to urban families from middle class and upper middle class backgrounds.

b. What is the correlation between geographical location (urban/rural/semi-urban) and smartphone ownership?

According to the results of the survey one can state that all the respondents for urban and semi urban backgrounds have access to and own cell phones which are smart and have a decent data pack.

c. Is there a correlation between family income percentage and smartphone ownership/data pack amount?

The results of the survey indicate that there is a significant relationship between the family income of the respondent and the type of cell phone ownership as well as the data pack used.

d. How does the type of house correlate with smartphone ownership?

There is a significant relationship between the house type of the respondent with the cell phone ownership. Though all the respondents own cell phones, the type of cell phone owned, in terms of cost and access to the internet varied according to the type of home ownership.

e. What is the relationship between the number of hours spent on social media and various demographic factors?

Access to data packs and wifi at home and the institution played a significant role in the number of hours spent on the internet. Though all the respondents are regular users of the cell phone and access the internet every now and then access to limited data

It is observed that there is no significant correlation between demographic characteristics (age, geographical location, family income, type of housing) and smartphone ownership, data pack amount, and social media usage patterns. Although demographic characteristics are significantly correlated with smartphone ownership, data pack amount, and social media usage patterns.

Access to Technology:

The following questions were explored to understand the extent of access and use of technology among the respondents

- a. What proportion of respondents have access to laptops and smartphones?
- b. Is there a preference for shared or personal devices among respondents?
- c. How do data pack availability and usage vary among respondents?
- d. What types of connections do respondents predominantly have on social media?

It was observed that all the respondents had access to cell phones but there was a difference in ownership of laptops and data packs used. Though majority of the respondents said they shared their family members a significant number of them.

That 261 of them had passwords on their devices and stored personal information which they did not share with all at home. Most of the respondents had people they know as their contacts though a few went out of the way and accepted requests from contacts of contacts and people they were curious about. What is significant is that the lack of physical or face to face contact with their connections made a few respondents bold enough to want to befriend people they are interested in and would normally not get in touch with in the physical world.

Awareness of Rights as a Citizen:

The following questions were administered to check the awareness of the respondents about their rights as citizens

- a. What is the level of awareness regarding cyber laws among respondents?
- b. How do respondents perceive their vulnerability to cybercrime, particularly women, other minority groups, and LGBTQ individuals?
- c. Perceptions of privacy settings and safety of personal information on social media platforms among respondents?
- d. Awareness about redressal mechanisms for cybercrimes and harassment

The respondents' awareness of cyber laws is varied, with a sizable portion have a some awareness but not complete understanding. Majority of the respondents are of the opinion that women and individuals belonging to minority communities are more susceptible to cyber crime. The fear is of harms caused due to their gender, sexual orientation or other personal traits.

Usage Patterns and Reasons:

- a. Primary reasons for using social media platforms
- b. Percentages of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) among respondents
- c. Is there a feeling of empowerment while using social media?
- d. Restrictions faced by respondents face while using social media
- e. Content of the posts shared on social media?

The responses reveal that respondents use social media for a variety of reasons including networking, information and knowledge enhancement, as a pass time for curation of an online image and to large extent for entertainment. As social media presence and popularity was perceived by the majority as a mark of their social involvement and participation, many of the respondents revealed that they suffer from severe, to moderate to mild levels of FOMO or Fear of Missing Out. Many expressed that they experienced a sense of empowerment quite a few were not very sure and had faced discrimination of some form or the other. The respondents also revealed to have faced restrictions on the use of social media by parental control. policies of the workplace and other concerns related to security and privacy. The question on content revealed the diverse nature of content shared by the respondents on social media ranging from pictures, to information to participation in social causes to expressing concerns on social and other issues, revealing the importance of social media as a platform for self-expression.

Harassment and Cybercrime:

- a. What percentage of respondents have faced harassment on social media?
- b. What actions have respondents taken in response to harassment on social media?
- c. Have respondents ever experienced sexual harassment on social media, and if so, what were the circumstances?
- d. Types of harassment encountered by the respondents.

The survey revealed a significant number of respondents have faced harassment online in some form or the other. In the wake of these harassment the respondents took various measures to deal with the harassment ranging from reporting the harassers to the social media platforms, to blocking the harassers to reporting them to higher authorities and sharing their experiences with their parents and other seniors. The respondents also shared experiences of sexually explicit harassment with vitriolic comments on their posts, to messaging them in private and sharing explicit sexual content, sexting, slutshaming and hurling abusive language against them. The nature of the harassment encountered ranged from cyberstalking to bullying, docking, slut shaming and hate speech, and impersonation. The survey also revealed the reluctance of respondents to freely talk about the harassment faced

which called for qualitative surveys as face-to-face interviews would enable a deeper dialogue with the respondents on their lived experiences online.

Participation in Online Movements:

- a. Percentage of respondents who claim that they have taken part in internet movements or supported some causes on social media.
- b. Did the respondent at any point of time in the past report an individual on the internet? And if that is the case, then for what reasons?
- c. Respondents' experiences and reasons that pushed them to become parts of movements or assisted in social causes via online platforms.

The section on the involvement of the respondents in online movements and support for social causes on social media platforms, revealed that a significant portion of respondents actively participated in such endeavors. Their engagement ranged from sharing posts and using campaign hashtags to signing petitions to causes that appealed to them. The responses reveal that many of the respondents are empathetic towards social causes and are part of several online communities, the respondents use the online platforms to spread awareness and mobilize support about various issues of concern. The respondents also acknowledged report harassers who violate their privacy and platform guidelines.

The survey illustrates the value of social media in supporting and addressing social issues, advocacy and initiatives aimed at establishing a safe environment online. While these quantitative statistics are crucial and show tendencies and behaviors in general, at times, they fail to catch the specificities of the lived reality and experiences online for certain groups of society such as younger women who have to negotiate challenges in the virtual space. In this regard, the focus of the research shifted to conducting in this case in particular, the focus group research method in order to, in a more detailed way, reveal the specifics of the younger women's presence on social media. Such a focus would illuminate the emerged struggles of self-expression and self-representation within the complexities of vulnerabilities experienced online. Young women's lived realities on the internet are of concern to the policymakers, platforms and leaders the research seeks to target in order to appreciate how the young women interact on the internet so that special strategies are developed that cater for their requirements and improve their online experiences in safe spaces.

CHAPTER 4

GENDERED DIGITAL LIVES: ACCESS, CONSTRAINT, AND THE EVERYDAY NEGOTIATION OF POWER

4.1 Introduction

Social media plays a very important role in how individuals perceive themselves, express their identities and network with peers and other like-minded people. Social media and the internet have gradually emerged as platforms for self-presentation and identity building, especially amongst young women. To study and understand the implications of gender dynamics in the digital world, it is imperative that one looks at how individuals refashion themselves and their online personas while using social media. Self-refashioning is a complex, and continuous process of working consciously and actively toward acquiring and building a desired image. This process can especially be noticed in the case of women who use social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook and involve themselves in activities such as blogging, vlogging and reel making. Women use such platforms to curate themselves carefully and consequently project themselves and their aspirations in specific ways. These curations reveal a complex interplay between the agency of women and pressures from society which gets mirrored in the digital world. Through the unique medium of the internet and social media women are able to voice and explore their identities. Women can be seen experimenting with new aspects of their identity, looks, interests, values. This could have immense implications on their self-esteem and self-concept. Alice Marwick writes, "Social media enables a strategic representation of self, allowing users to craft and manage an online persona that aligns with the idealized self they wish to present" (Marwick, 2015).

Social media at times serve as a location where hegemonic traditional gender roles, such as the emphasis on physical attractiveness for women's bodies, are perpetuated. At the same time, they open up areas for contestation and subversion. By using social media, young women can initiate and participate in campaigns against the strict standardization of beauty as an image and challenge societal beauty standards, advocate for body positivity, and gender equality. As stated, many times, problems regarding sexism, body shaming, or mental illness find amplification through the social networking sites via influencers and activists. These initiatives help construct different narratives that challenge the ideals of dominant culture and create conditions for plural representation of female images of identity. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Digital platforms provide a space to distribute feminist ideas and challenge them, which leads to new forms of gender politics" (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

4.2 Methodology

The study focused on students studying in a college of engineering at Mumbai who had an appropriate level of understanding regarding how to work the internet and own smart devices. These students have also completed an online survey. 30 students were interviewed through 2023. The survey was designed to estimate their demographic profile, technical knowledge, technical appliances ownership, as well as internet use, social networking exposure, and experiences and motivations behind taking part in web-based social movements along with other pertinent concerns. However, as the limitations of a quantitative survey restricts respondents and prevents them from being candid with regard to sensitive or private matters, it was felt necessary that a more detailed qualitative approach would be required. Qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to enhance the study and findings. These qualitative methods were designed to allow for open-ended discussion, through which participants might express their views, experiences, and insights in more details and

depth. The one-on-one interviews and group discussion were directed to explore the thoughts, motivations, and emotions of the respondents and reasons for being an active social media and internet users.

Semi-structured interviews enable respondents to elaborate on answers, provide anecdotes, and even put contexts to their responses. This facilitates detailed exploration of complex issues that will ultimately help understand the underlying themes and patterns not picked through the quantitative survey. Discussions during the focus group were highly dynamic in that they enabled the participants to engage in an interactive dialogue, share ideas, and then contribute to each other's thinking in order to provide a rich understanding of the group opinion and the general experience. The integration of the quantitative data drawn from the preliminary survey and the qualitative information gained through interviews and focus group discussions would offer this work the opportunity to discover attitudes, behavior, and motivations that exist among engineering students in Mumbai towards using the internet, participation in social media, and other kinds of online social movements. This mixed-methods approach will help capture a more holistic view of the subject matter and generate insights for further analysis and interpretation. In addition, an in-depth textual analysis of online groups and open to public view social media handles of young women in the age group of 18-25 was conducted. These handles were looked at as study sites to unearth ways and means by which young women express themselves and navigate their identities on social media, the hurdles they encounter in the process and the organic and other means by which the concept of self and selfhood evolves. Another important strand of the study is the misogyny that exists online and a study of the same to interrogate how the digital in many ways because of its nebulous contours aids misogyny and hate. Handles and social media sites which explore operation of gender in the online space and try to spread awareness and bring equity in laws and operation on the internet were also studied to see how internet is used as a site by these organisations to spread awareness and harness public and state opinion to make internet related laws more inclusive and gender sensitive.

Some observations made by the respondents in the interviews and focus group discussions:

A- "Unknown boys on Instagram would send a picture of their private parts and talk in a sexually abusive manner"

B- "When I had an Instagram account earlier, I was new to this, so strangers at first try to be friendly then try to blackmail you through the bad use of your personal posts". When I came to know about this, I approached my parents, and with their support and guidance, this was forwarded to the cyber cell of police, and it was reported to Instagram. Such pages were blocked too. They even tried hacking into my account. That is why I had to delete that account. I opened a new account when I first started going to college but now it is totally private and fully secured with security passwords.

These accounts demonstrate how the restrictions in one's defense need sophisticated cyber security measures and learning programs in understanding the handling of protection of their digital presence. The responses about being specifically targeted in social media and marginalised groups bring to light the intersectionality of online abuse, targeting those by gender, sexuality, and other identity markers.

C-"As people are not aware of these things they usually pick up on them and make jokes on them which are hurtful but they don't do it and this all leads to things that should not happen."

D- "As the internet gives anonymity to a person, the person feels that they can say anything. They feel that no one will really care if they use harsh words or be cruel to someone as no one would really know about it."

E- "Because of the vulgarity I usually see on other people's sections.". It's just not that the women and the LGBTQ are vulnerable these days, men doing their makeup and posting videos, their comment section where you can find

the actual crappy comments and whatnot. For women, it goes on a long list, from creepy comments to DMs. Also, in the private accounts it's a little safer, but the public accounts are much more vulnerable because the more accounts they interact with the more hate. For the LGBTQ I thought society is still under the rock, but the social was a better space for them but isn't. Vulgar comments saying 'you need to first decide what you are' (talking about their gender) rude comments over the use of pronouns etc. Such narratives show that online harassment is widespread and it puts a great mental strain on a person. The 'not-so-visible' nature of the internet makes it easy for harassers and harsh for victims to access any help or redress.

The emotional and mental effect of cyber harassment has been a common motive in the given responses. Victims generally get isolated, stressed and unsafe, which affects daily life and mental health.

F- "Being a part of the LGBTQ+ family, can't really say cyber crime, but for LGBTQ+ family, mental/emotional attack is done by talking about their sexuality, gender and all may cause more insecurity."

G- "I cannot put it in words, but in short, it's prejudice. Minorities (especially women, religious and caste minorities in India) are more prone to crime in general as anybody who follows current affairs would know. It's a sad truth that India is one of the least safe places in the world for women. Even when they are the largest minority in numbers.". and why should cyberspace be an exemption to that? it's actually easier to flaunt their bigotry through a monitor.". These testimonies show just how severe the mental and emotional toll of online harassment is, and more protective systems and interventions need to be in place to care for vulnerable individuals.

Respondents shared strategies for dealing with online harassment, including blocking and reporting offenders, and seeking help from authorities.

H: "When I was in school for our convenience, the teacher made a WhatsApp group and from there a boy got the numbers of all the girls and then he randomly started texting and calling.". Then everyone told me about this because I was the only person who could speak before the principal and the trustee so I complained to the authorities and then they suspended him from school for a month.

I: When I came across an indecent message on my direct Instagram messaging, I went to my parents and with their assistance sent this to the cyber cell of the police and also reported it to Instagram and blocked such pages.

Such reactions indicate that it is in the significance of support systems, both personal and institutional, in handling and mitigating online harassment. From unwanted explicit content, cyberstalking to their mental health impacts, these experiences as told by the respondents indicate a critical need for some form of intervention and support system. Where these social media sites do grant people the means for expression and connection, both speech and connectivity are, to a very great measure, seriously at risk here. It is therefore the better part of wisdom that more mechanisms to enhance better cybersecurity, efficient education schemes, supportive communities, and laws that safeguard the vulnerable come into action to handle issues on these digital fronts.

4.3 Emerging Themes

Sexuality

The internet, as per the interviews, provides a space of women who resist patriarchal constraint as well as redefine gender roles in general. Donna Haraway and others describe these as "cyborg" spaces through which women might find ways to deconstruct and challenge oppressive social constriction and create identities which somehow

"exceed" description and definition in their formulation of gender and sexuality. Digital feminists in India have talked about the centrality of online spaces for women to express themselves freely, with autonomy in articulating their desires and going against the gendered expectations offered by their family, community, or at a societal level (Bhaskaran, 2020). In particular, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr have emerged as essential spaces for young women to express their sexuality. Social media allows them to share content, to search for other sexual orientations, and connect with communities which support different expressions of sexuality. For instance, they are posting body positivity; there are selfies that are used to demonstrate confidence in bodies or a freer conversation about sexual orientation and desire, among others, that was not possible offline. The interviewed students agree that through Instagram, young women have been able to profoundly express body positivity and sexuality without shame. The influence of key influencers like Neha Parulkar and Sakshi Sindwani, among others, in challenging narrow beauty standards and advocating for self-love and acceptance has had much impact. Through their means, they help women embrace their bodies and talk down any form of body policing of the female body. Such movements have much importance for young women's self-esteem and confidence, empowering them to defy societal expectations and express their sexuality freely (Chakraborty, 2021). Dating apps like Tinder and Bumble give young women the platform to explore their sexuality in romantic and sexual relationships of their choice. These applications bring about the new dynamics of dating culture in which women are active participants in selecting their partners and defining the nature of their relationships. Contrary to old dating mores, dating apps empowered women to have greater control over their desires without fear of judgment or adverse social consequences. In digital spaces, artistic modes of expression, including poetry, visual art, and dance, have been observed to be flourishing with young women as free agents, using them as canvases to unveil themes of sexuality and intimacy. Tumblr and Instagram share popular platforms for artwork or poetry about experiences of sexuality, relationships, and gender. Younger women use Tumblr to share erotic poetry or visual arts expressing their sexual identity, desire, and fantasy. This digital form of self-expression allows them to face taboos and relax the standards that are placed upon what's acceptable for women to express themselves freely. Such a portal helps women discover their voices, establishing them to push against restraint in gender roles as supported by the environment of open critical challenges to the restrictive nature of gender norms (Roy, 2019).

As a student put it, "I was always judged for my short hair and my choice of clothes in school and college. Social media and platforms like Instagram gave me the confidence to explore my choices in a better manner. I found solidarity in the posts shared by other girls like me who did not conform to the traditional looks or clothes.". I started exploring my choices more confidently, I shared more photos, and it made me happy that my juniors and some of my peers appreciated me and were even inspired by me. These posts brought with them a fair share of sexist and misogynist posts but I learnt how to deal with it and move on."

Subjectivity

All the students interviewed said that the internet and social media handles gave them a sense of self. They took pains to project themselves and their social media handles to display what they truly expected of themselves, an identity they have perhaps repressed or could not express freely in the real world as because of societal, parental, or peer pressure. Social media is actually a space where I may be myself without the burden of judgment. I have the ability to share any thoughts or experiences without putting on a mask. Self-expression is quite important for many people in digital space.

Interviews with these young women also revealed how often they invested a lot of effort into curating their online presence to reflect who they really are. The quantity of work here suggests a much more mainstream sense in which people are using digital platforms to manage and negotiate their identities. This curating meant selecting

specific images and posting of more personal thoughts along with engaging content, which reflected their true interest and values. "I carefully pick every photo I upload and every status update. It's actually a form of creating a version of myself that I like to become, minus the things I have to contend with at home or college."

While it may seem like trying to seek favor and attention, there is, in fact, a deeper longing behind it—they want to be themselves. The online place becomes a space where these women can express their identity that otherwise has been restricted for them to be by society, family, or peers. Take the case of Responded A, who is a 20-year-old engineering student from Mumbai. A belongs to a traditional family and upholds, both at home and socially, strong gender roles. At home, she is forced to live up to these expectations, though not part of her belief or aspiration. However, on Instagram, A has created a self that tells her interest in art and feminism. She follows and engages with accounts posting and discussing gender equality, shares her own artwork, and engages in conversations that would merit frowns to her offline life. A's online presence gives her a sense of self. She says, "On Instagram, I can be the person I really am. I can voice my opinions, share my art and connect with others in agreement, without fear of criticism or reprisal." To A and many like her, digital platforms have become a haven in which to experiment and assert their identities, beyond what is allowed offline.

Another example is that of B, a 21-year-old student who balances two distinct identities—one that conforms to her family's expectations and another that reflects her personal beliefs and interests. Offline, B adheres to her family's conservative views and cultural norms. On her Twitter and LinkedIn handles however, she actively participates in discussions on women in technology, the need for a more inclusive material related to women in STEM, and mental health. B uses LinkedIn efficiently to connect with professionals and mentors who share interests and would help in her professional growth and Twitter to connect with thought leaders and influencers who share her concerns about pertinent issues. She says, "Social media gives me the cover and the confidence to express my thoughts without being criticized about matters that concern me which I do have the courage to speak to my family freely." Social media for her is not just an avenue for personal development but also a space which gives her the liberty to exercise her agency as well as explore her identity in an enabling supportive space.

C, a 20-year-old computer professional has an ardent desire to do well in coding and be successful in her internship with a leading MNC, she speaks about having to deal with the stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes of her male teammates. Her male teammates often undervalue her technical acumen and assign her with work that restrict her growth and does not align with her aspirations. In response to this, C uses LinkedIn and professional forums to connect with a network of professionals who will go beyond stereotypes and recognize her true abilities. She shares her coding projects, writes articles on technology trends, and connects with professionals in her desired field. C explains, "Linked In is where I can speak of my skills without being judged based on my gender. People see my work first, not my gender." C's work has borne fruit; she got an internship and mentorship through the same online platform. Her case illustrates how online platforms are helping women circumvent professional aspirations and break through gender barriers that are prevalent in traditional environments.

D, a 21-year-old student posts on Twitter to criticize accepted cultural norms ascribing to gender. Hailing from a traditional family, D felt burdened with expectations placed on her concerning how she was supposed to behave, dress, and restrict her professional aspirations. But on Twitter, she can muster the courage to critique social norms, raise her voice for gender equality, and connect and reach out to likeminded peers. D actively participates in conversations about women's rights, expressing her opinions on how cultural norms should not only become more considerate but also more balanced. She says social media has enabled her to spread her wings and express her opinions freely with like-minded peers. At times her online participation in socially relevant issues are mirrored in

her interactions with family and friends. The confidence she did not have earlier to express herself freely has been slowly building through her interactions on social media.

E, a 23-year-old engineering student regularly campaigns for environmental issues on social media. E never had the chance to talk about her environmental concerns with family and friends. However, through Facebook and Twitter, E found a group of people who shared her interest in environmental activism. She has now formed a network with them and regularly organizes programs to create awareness about environmental issues like sustainable development and climate change both online and offline. She has also started blogging and shares her concerns and research on the environment through her blogs. Blogging not just gave her an outlet and a platform to express herself but also helped her reach out to other environment enthusiasts in the country and abroad. She not also has the confidence to discuss her concerns with family and friends.

The phenomena observed in these case studies reflect a global trend: As digital spaces increasingly become embedded in daily life, people continue to utilize the platforms to test and assert their identities. This trend has several far-reaching effects: digital spaces empower individuals by providing them with public spaces wherein people can say whatever they want without fear of judgement. This empowerment is important for the marginalized groups, who might not find any safe space to assert themselves in their off-line lives. For instance, most members of the LGBTQ+ community make use of digital platforms in pursuit of self-discovery and validation due to inability to express their identities in the physical world.

Online communities formed with people with shared interest provide validation and solidarity to young women to explore their interests and aspirations which may not be accepted by the people in their immediate surroundings. Online forums and groups which address or relate to the cause of women's empowerment and gender equality offer members a place to share experiences or seek advice while participating in collective action. These communities make individuals feel they belong and grant a sense of solidarity and belonging which can play a very critical role in personal as well as social change. Such free expression and display of diverse identities in the virtual sphere acts as a potentially subversive force for challenging and eventually changing social norms. As more and more 'real' selves find representation online, they help propel cultural shifts toward increased diversity and acceptance. Social movements like the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter through digital platforms, for example, illustrate how previously marginalised voices are amplified by digital platforms and how critical issues become important material for public discourse. Awareness campaigns also exert pressure on power centers to address systemic issues. The recent spread of such movements shows exactly how negotiation of digital identity leads to defining and propelling social change.

Representation

Social media has entered every walk of life today and is changing the way we communicate, form our opinion, and interact with people. It exerts influence on all age groups, gender, education level, and social classes and is constantly blurring boundaries. In India, the growth rate of social media users is tremendous, especially that of women. The phenomenon calls for an analysis of the particular attractions that social media holds for women and what is motivating them to engage in it. One of the reasons women are attracted to social media is the sense of empowerment it provides. Social media networks make users feel they have the world at their fingertips and help them remain informed and actively involved in bringing change in their realities and those of others. Examples of such engagement include blogging, posting pictures, and commenting on happenings. Users collaborate to form public opinions on social and national issues, thereby pressuring governments and state agencies and social actors to respond.

Self-representation on the internet, and specifically on social media, may be visual as well as written. Visual self-representation involves photos posted by individuals of themselves and others, cover and profile pictures, and the design elements of their profiles. Written self-representation includes blogs, status updates, captions, comments, tweets, and check-ins. There is a significant difference between presentation and representation. While presentation involves what individuals intend to project about themselves, representations involve the meanings that different audiences attach to presentations. For example, on a platform like Facebook, diverse groups, comprising family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances interact with users; and so, no post can be entirely considered private. Yet, security measures notwithstanding, digital objects are inherently public to some extent. For instance, one might post a picture of herself in a protest activity to support a cause. Such an image might be regarded as bold by the family and controversial by coworkers. The way online self-representations could mean so much more than just presentation is what makes self-expression on the internet rather complicated.

Individuals share all aspects of their lives on numerous sites, earning enormous following. These users are referred to as microcelebrities (Senft 2013; Marwick 2013) and influencers (Abidin 2015), who chronicle their lives and lifestyles with text and images and interact with fans both online and offline. They market their fame by including ads in their posts. Influencers are categorically distinct from typical users in the sense that they generate income by generating ads, sponsorships, and advertorials. They produce highly personal and individualistic content to be close to their audience (Lövhheim 2013). Other celebrities may not generate income directly through their social media, but it serves to enhance their brand and value in other mediums such as movies, books, television shows, music, and or even political activism. Indian fashion influencer Urfi Javed showcases her aesthetic on Instagram and collaborates with brands for paid endorsements. With authentic style and personal storytelling as a way to gain a loyal following, she has become able to transition from being a blogger to one of the most prominent fashion influencers and brand ambassadors. "Influencers have revolutionized the way we understand personal branding, using their online presence to cultivate a dedicated following and monetize influence." (Marwick, 2013)

Among the students interviewed, Aarti Jalgaonkar has Instagram page with over 956 thousand followers, Anjali has an Instagram page @whoanj with over 24.1 thousand followers, Rajitha Krishnan has 1,179 followers, Prachi Patil 27.9 thousand followers and Diya Bhati has over 2,131 followers. All these young women aspire to become and are to an extent influencers who in their own unique way are reaching out to lakhs of Instagram users through their pictures and reels. While Aarti tries to project the girl next door image and use her Maratha roots to reach out to residents of Maharashtra by picking up issues that concern or are of interest to fellow residents of Mumbai and Maharashtra, Rajitha, Prachi and Anjali use their Instagram page, reels and stories to express themselves and their artistic pursuits. Anjali being a professional dancer uses the platform to express her dancing skills and also to promote products through paid partnership. Rajitha has a deep interest and an inclination to promote classical dance and Kerala and its rich cultural traditions in the form of cinema, food and locations. She uses music from the rich Malayali film industry to create content to promote her areas of interest and Prachi is interested in pets and fashion. Her handle tries to connect with the world using her passion through reels and memes.

Notwithstanding their ability to push people to market themselves as brands, social media remains primarily self-expression and means of connecting between women. Many women, thus, blog for a creative vent and as a way to speak out against a system that aims to silence them. Online women's communities are therefore channels for sharing dreams, fears, and experiences that bring relief and solidarity. These groups have assisted thousands of women to overcome challenges, find creative ways to be constructive, and gain an element of agency in different areas. The Facebook group "Sheroes Hangout" is a platform for discussing both personal and professional challenges, sharing achievements, and soliciting advice. In this group, members can find a supportive community

offering practical and emotional support for finding solutions to various aspects of life. In particular, newlywed women and young mothers benefit from such platforms that enable them to voice doubts about their new roles and receive unbiased recommendations from others. Since the participants do not have personal knowledge of each other, the recommendations feel unbiased and encouraging. Instagram-based "Mommy A-Z" is one example: through it, young mothers share experiences and seek recommendations. The community discusses everything from breastfeeding tips to managing postpartum depression, offering a network of support that helps new mothers not feel so alone. "Online communities offer women a unique space for solidarity and support, enabling them to share experiences and advice in a safe environment." (Lövheim, 2013)

By the second decade of the 21st century, smartphones with front and back cameras, good screens, and cheap data plans became ubiquitous. This technological advancement made visual representation on the internet commonplace, with selfies becoming a cultural phenomenon around 2013. A selfie, typically taken with a smartphone's front-facing camera, allows the photographer to see and capture themselves simultaneously. "The activity of sharing selfies is an affirmation and also a construction of the self." (Senft, 2013) In effect, the unlimited photographs taken without the cost of film or development, and with privacy in digital storage, have transformed personal photography. Research on selfies frequently has as its focus their operation as visual artifacts or representations. For example, Paul Frosh argues that selfies are gestures that point to communicative acts and not objects (Frosh 2015). Unlike the photos in some album, which are traces of material reality, selfies index the performance of a communicative act. They say not only "see this, here, now" but also "see me showing you me," making them traces of personal performance. Bollywood superstars like Alia Bhatt and Priyanka Chopra use Instagram pretty much to share selfies of their personal and professional life. Fans enjoy the idea of getting closer to the stars through such posts that blur the lines between their public and private personas.

Social media as a tool plays a dual role, it can be used as a tool for expression as well as empowerment. Indian women use social media to curate their personas, connect with likeminded people, and gain support from virtual communities. The evolution of the microcelebrity and influencer sectors is an indicator of a highly promising subject: turning personal narratives into commercial success on social media. As visual representation through selfies and other digital images becomes the norm, there is a growing need to understand the communicative nature of these acts. Social media, as a result, finds itself as a complex space where personal and public, presentation and representation, intertwine in ways that continually reshape our understanding of identity and community.

Women have used platforms like Twitter and Instagram to organize and advertise various forms of social justice movements. In India, for example, the #PinjraTod movement started as a campaign against discriminatory hostel rules for women students but soon spread across the country due to social media promotion. Protests were widespread and linked to changes in policies in many universities. Women, of late, are increasingly turning to social media to promote health and wellness among themselves and their communities. Dr. Tanaya Narendra, "Dr. Cuterus" on Instagram, is using her "voice" to inform women about reproductive health. She is not merely the popular voice; she's becoming an authority who is looked up to by women as a voice they can trust and bank on. Masoom Minawala is a fashion entrepreneur, using her Instagram page to sell her jewelry line and offer fashion tips. From social media platforms, she has transformed into a progressive entrepreneur as is evident from her having clients from all over the world. Proving as expressed by Baym "Social media makes it possible for voices to be heard and individuals to participate in the public conversation as previously unimaginable." (Baym, 2015)

Networking Awareness and Solidarity

Social media is turning into an important avenue for networking, professional development, and personal branding. LinkedIn has especially become an important space for students and professionals to network and grow in the professional sphere. This survey explored how a specific group of users used LinkedIn and other social media to connect with peers, seniors, and industry influencers, to seek internship and job opportunities and consolidate their presence professionally in the online world. The students who were interviewed agreed to having maintained their LinkedIn profiles for updating their knowledge, professional interests, and achievements. Such a proactive step from the side of students keeps them in the view among people from the same profession, while at the same time letting them interact with probable employers, mentors, and fellow colleagues. One student explained how she sent a LinkedIn message to an established professional in that field she was interested in. She wrote a letter of introduction stating why she was interested and how much she wanted to learn. That led her into a mentorship where she got really valuable insights and guidance. "LinkedIn has been a game-changer for me. I connected with a senior data analyst who has been mentoring me for the past six months. His advice has really helped me in charting my career path," she said. "I quite often update my profile on LinkedIn. Once I received a message from a recruiter who saw my profile, thought that I would be good for work at his company through an internship, and contacted me. It was an excellent opportunity that I would not otherwise have had," another student added. These examples reveal that LinkedIn can act as a platform to fill a gap between academic and the professional world for students. LinkedIn also provided the students with the opportunity to enhance their professional presence's visibility and credibility with recommendations, endorsements, and by following professional thought leaders.

LinkedIn has become more than just a networking place for many students; it is a search ground for jobs. The site allows the user to search for jobs by location, industry, and even job function; it often does this in an attempt to locate more suitable opportunities. Besides that, it also informs its users of new postings that match their criteria, thus not letting them miss any potential openings. A new graduate said that LinkedIn helped her to find her first job after graduation. "After graduation, I was pretty nervous about finding a job, she says. "I created job alerts on LinkedIn and started applying for various jobs directly through the website. Afterward, I networked to a few alumni at my university who were employed in my desired field of study. Their advice and guidance along with their connections have proven invaluable, because after networking, I eventually found my job as marketing coordinator.

Yet another student spoke about how important LinkedIn can be in establishing and providing access to a professional network that will connect you to jobs. "I began connecting to professionals in my field while still in college. By graduation time, I had a solid network of contacts who were familiar with my skills and career aspirations. When it was time to start looking for that job, the network was seriously useful," she explained. The main benefit of LinkedIn is to be able to interact directly with recruiters and future employers. Unlike other kinds of traditional job search methods, LinkedIn focuses on professional networking and provides users with an opportunity to enhance their knowledge regarding companies, attain job referrals, and sometimes interviews. Other than LinkedIn, the other social media also play an equally important role in the lives of young working women and students.

For instance, in building one's personal brand, developing expertise, and speaking to the industry community, there are platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. A computer graphics student recalled how she used Instagram to share her portfolio. "I treat my Instagram profile as an online portfolio. I post my latest projects, share behind-the-scenes looks at my creative process, and engage with other designers. I get freelance clients, and attract a following in the design world, she said. The other student is an aspiring journalist who spends her time using Twitter to air her opinions about current affairs and build relationships with professionals in the media. "I think with Twitter,

one will get the latest breaking news and trends," she explained. "Through this, she uploads her articles, participates in a discussion with journalists and editors, and endeavors to build up her reputation as a knowledgeable and involved media professional."

Social media platforms can complement each other to provide enough avenues for a professional presence on the Internet. LinkedIn is generally used for professional networking and job hunting, while Instagram and Twitter are used by students to portray their creativity and expertise. A respondent shared her experience of online harassment on social media. "I don't know if it's a 'female in tech' thing, but I'm constantly receiving unsolicited messages and comments that are absolutely inappropriate. It's frustrating because it takes away from the professional image that I am trying to build. I have had to block several users and report their behaviour but it is an ongoing issue. "Social media is exhausting. There is always the pressure to post proper content that's professional yet engaging and be always seen in the best light. Which, she admitted, "can be overwhelming".

These challenges necessitate digital literacy that will inculcate the young professionals with resilience. They should understand how to deal with privacy settings, online harassment, and achieve a fair balance between authenticity and professionalism. Social media continues to expand its wings and grow as a platform and become an integral aspect of professional development but with challenging aspects involved negotiating this digital landscape which is full of cyberbullying, harassment and pressure to maintain one's online persona. The ever-changing nature of social media necessitates the need to be aware of best practices and new opportunities to unlock its full potential for career development

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Entertainment

Social media has become an important element in the lives of students; it influences their behavior, preferences, and social interactions. The most significant factor for students' engagement with social media is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This phenomenon not only explains why students are so eager to use social media but also argues that the fear of missing content, especially entertainment, drives social media consumption. Discussions and interviews with the students reveal that FOMO and the need for entertainment are interrelated, and students tend to be attracted to platforms to be updated on emerging trends, news, and new content shared by their peers and influencers.

FOMO or Fear of missing out is a very pervasive feeling shared by regular users of social media of missing out on moments and experiences which others are experiencing on social media. The regular updates and posts by friends and peers further enhance the anxiety experienced by individuals and aggravates the feeling of urgency and desperation to be connected. According to Przybylski et al. (2013), "FOMO is a ubiquitous feature of modern technology-facilitated lifestyles, and it can significantly influence social media engagement." Young adults are more vulnerable to social comparison. Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat provide an easy environment for social comparison since they give the view of other people's lives. Baker et al. (2016) recently found out that "students who experienced higher levels of FOMO reported greater engagement with social media, particularly during times when they felt socially excluded."

Entertainment is one of the main reasons for students to stay hooked on social media. Funny, creative, as well as visually appealing content which Instagram SnapChat provides seems like an escape route that releases the tension of academic life for the students. Reels, short videos, and memes shared by peers and influencers, are the most sought-after source of entertainment and usually become the centre of social interaction for the students. This can be attributed to the design of these platforms as the algorithms designed by the social media companies

have been optimised in favor of content that is engaging and entertaining because such content keeps users hooked. According to a report by the Pew Research Center (2018), "the entertainment value of social media content is one of the primary reasons cited by young adults for their frequent use of these platforms."

The research tries to understand the relationship between FOMO, entertainment, and social media use of Instagram reels and YouTube Shorts, which has gained massive popularity among students. The cause behind the success of Instagram reels and YouTube Shorts has been its algorithm, where the feed is curated in short and engaging videos that will fit the user's interests and preferences. These challenges and trends that have been created by the said platforms have brought a cycle of content creation and consumption to students' lives. It becomes their compulsion to be involved lest they miss out on the next viral phenomenon. The platform design encourages people to create and share short, creative videos and also contributed to the popularity of the said app. The focus of the platforms on user-generated content blurs the distinction between creators and consumers, easily turning them into content producers and consumers simultaneously. The ability of content creation further increases the entertainment value of the platforms and further fuels FOMO because the students are always exposed to new trends and challenges.

Influencers shape social media trends and consumption styles among students and influence the usage of particular social media handles, and sites. Influencers have massive followers on sites like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube producing content targeting their viewers' attention and further fueling their interest, thereby creating trends among them. Such creators have a higher influence level among students, as they are more susceptible to peer pressure and experience anxiety if they fear missing out. According to a study by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), "social media influencers have a significant impact on the purchasing decisions and lifestyle choices of young adults, particularly in the entertainment sphere." The research further proved that students tend to engage more with influencer content if they think the influencer is relatable or subscribes to their aspirations.

The visually based nature of Instagram makes it a prime location for influencers to showcase themselves through the engaging posts they share on a daily basis, mostly regarding lifestyle, fashion, and entertainment. Students follow influencers so as not to miss a single new development and for entertainment. A case study by Arora and Sanni (2019) highlights the impact of influencer culture on Instagram for college students. According to the study, students who follow influencers on Instagram are more prone to FOMO, as they feel the necessity to keep up with the latest trends as well as content shared by such influencers. The study also reports that entertainment value is also an attractor for students to the content shared by the influencers, which are typically behind-the-scenes moments at their homes, collaborations with other influencers, and going viral challenges. Although FOMO and desire for entertainment purposes drive engagement, their application also has undesirable aspects. It is likely that students can develop a sense of anxiety, stress, and inadequacy in life if they are always connected to this round-the-clock stream of information. Social comparison is also a negative byproduct as users share highlights of what they're actually experiencing in life, which creates unrealistic expectations. A study by Oberst et al. (2017) established that "students experiencing high levels of FOMO have higher chances of developing negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness." Entertainment-driven content has been associated with the process of fueling negative feelings among students as they end up constantly seeing unrealistic representations of life as compared to their present realities.

Reels are a feature available on Instagram that have allowed the young women to creatively present themselves through short, engaging videos set to music. Many young women demonstrate their styles in fashion, dance abilities, makeup tutorials, or even motivational messages through Reels. #bodypositivity movement is also being promoted through reels and posts where women post reels highlighting the importance of self-love and acceptance

of once body type through sharing videos which celebrate inclusivity of all body types. These Reels not only entertain but enable women to break free from the societal beauty standards and lend their voices for inclusiveness and diversity.

Social media platforms have democratized content creation enabling young women to find a voice and gain control over themselves in ways that were previously inaccessible. Young women can create and share content with millions of others, influence trends, start conversations, and connect with a broader audience while staying entertained. An everyday example is the way in which millions of young women are forced into maintaining an online persona which is in tune with the idealised image created by social media. This unhealthy obsession leads to a scampering tendency for likes, followers, and engagement which end up being felt as metrics for social status and self-worth. The pressure to participate in these challenges comes from FOMO. Not participating means missing out on a shared experience that dominates every conversation within their social circles.

Many of the students interviewed said they do not watch the latest Netflix series or dive into a movie; instead, they're glued to YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels, absorbing what's usually termed as "cringe content." "It's quick and funny," a student says, like it's no big deal. "I don't really want to commit to a good movie or show during weekdays." Statistics reveal that people in India spend way more time on social media than on OTT apps like Netflix and Amazon Prime. In 2023 alone, roughly 25 crore Indians were accessing platforms and consuming Reels and Shorts and most of this screen time was taken up by Millennials and Gen Z. Before TikTok was banned in 2020, India had used 5.5 billion hours on it in 2019. Though the students do not mention our latest Reel binge like how they would recount a huge concert or night at the movies, the fact is, reel bingeing has slowly become the default entertainment for youngsters. These short videos perfectly fit their lives, require nothing more than a glimpse of the screen and there is always something new to watch. Many start and finish the day by watching them. What makes this entertainment even more fascinating is the almost unnoticeable line between creators and viewers of reels. Most of the reels are actually created by people who are all their peers and friends. The constant online shift between what's cool and what's uncool, combined with the internet's love of mockery, makes short content perfectly suited for gatekeeping. By laughing at people who post these short videos, they're basically reassuring themselves that they are better than them. When asked why they watch these short videos the interviewed students replied with "you HAVE to see this" "I just want to see what 'those' people are like." This other-ing is key to understanding the psychology of the students. It is about drawing a line between them and "that type" of people. Because when we witness a man acting careless or stupid - a little inconsiderate, whether intentionally or unintentionally - we really cringe because we see ourselves standing in his shoes. We also laugh because it feels nice to have someone out there who is worse than us. It was through TikTok, the social media site that has gained popular use even in Tier III cities and rural towns, that short videos really went viral. Exploiting the vernacular, TikTok influencers were producing content that reflected their experiences. Four out of fifteen of the highest-paid TikTokers in the world as of the platform's shutdown were Indian. That aspirational feel was transferred when Instagram Reels became the new way to create content.

Cyber Crime and Violence

Utilizing the internet, especially social media, presents previously unheard-of chances for interaction, expression, and connection. These advantages do, however, carry a major danger, particularly for young women. The misogyny that exists in the physical world is frequently mirrored—and perhaps amplified—by the internet realm. Anonymity provides a shelter for people who commit acts of hate, violence, and harassment against women who openly express themselves or establish their identities online. The girls whose texts were analyzed and have appeared in different studies have testified to having suffered hate crimes, violence, and cybercrime. This work looks into the

various forms of misogyny practiced on the internet which include; rape and molestation threats, slut-shaming, as well as the broader impacts these crimes have on the mental health and freedom of speech for women. Misogyny, which is defined as hate or bias towards women, has become an increasingly popular evil sweeping the actual and virtual worlds. With The Internet growing with a wide audience and relative anonymity, it has turned into a haven for violence and discrimination against women. As more and more women access the online world, they often find themselves facing misogynistic behavior just as brutal as it is offline. As Jane (2016) puts it, "cybersexism is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is deeply embedded in the broader societal context of gender inequality." That means the systemic sexism women suffer everyday finds expression in the misogyny suffered online. Far from being a leveler, the internet often serves to turn these prejudices into a cancerous growth as they lead to consequences more virulent than they are potent.

'Slut-shaming' or harassment or condemnation of women because of their actual or perceived sexual conduct is a common form of abuse on the internet. The basis of this practice is the idea that women's sexuality needs to be restricted and controlled. Slut-shaming on social media can take many forms, such as disparaging remarks, unapproved posting of private photos (revenge porn), or coordinated campaigns of harassment targeted at discrediting or dehumanising women. The internet anonymity allows the perpetrators to commit such acts boldly, without any fear of the repercussions. According to Dunn (2015), "the disinhibition effect provided by anonymity online motivates individuals to state opinions and undertake actions they may never adopt in offline life." Due to the lack of responsibility, misogynistic ideologies increase unrestrained, leading to significant damages to the victims.

One of the main reasons, arguably, for online misogyny is the fact that the internet creates anonymity. While many acts might be linked to who is doing them in real life, the online world eliminates identities, hiding individuals behind pseudonyms or anonymous profiles. This anonymity can incite impunity, and individuals can thus resort to harassment, threats, and other types of violence without the fear of retribution. The anonymity of the internet often emboldens perpetrators of online misogyny. This anonymity allows Indians to engage in harassment with little fear of repercussions, as internet penetration rapidly increases there. In 2020, an Indian student, identified as Aisha (name changed for privacy), was targeted with explicit rape threats after she posted a video criticizing the handling of a local rape case. Her threats came from anonymous accounts, and in spite of her efforts to report abuse, the pertinent authorities' response was inadequate. Aisha's case raises questions on how social media anonymity protects the culprits and further hurdles in bringing matters of online harassment into public consciousness. Against this backdrop, an Indian woman faces the threat of physical violence-including rape and murder-by her perpetrator. Such threats are usually employed to silence women who have raised controversial or sensitive issues

4.4 Textual Analysis

Analysis of Open Instagram Pages/Websites/Groups reveals that Internet celebrities enjoy more popularity and followers than some of our real life celebrities. Poet Rupri Kaur seemed to be a hot favorite with her Instagram account. Rupri Kaur has about 1.8 million followers and about 507 posts to her credit on Instagram. Rupri Kaur's 2015 Instagram post picturing her lying in bed with her clothes and sheets stained with a small amount of menstrual blood catapulted her into instant headlines. This picture was banned by Instagram. Kaur did not take this lying down, she in fact fought back by bringing to light the hypocrisy of the site which allowed pictures of "objectified" and "pornified" women but had pulled out her post. Followers flocked to her, cheering her on as she added, "I will not apologise for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in underwear but not be okay with a small leak." Instagram was forced to back out. Insults and death threats were launched at Kaur, but her followers on Instagram grew seven times over. Kaur is more of a spoken word artist and is perceived to be too

aggressive or uncomfortable. Kaur's short poems continue to churn out simple, raw lines as short visual poems dealing with topics such as rape, domestic violence and alcoholism. Her poems are usually accompanied by a startling image

Kaur prefers to call her poetry 'design poetry' – poems based on the spoken word where what is usually under the wraps in society is voiced using simple pictorial language and images. Kaur is not alone in this endeavor, there are many others who explore the anonymity and creative canvas offered by the internet to explore their creativity and find voice and agency as women. Kaur has collaborated with Carlota Guerrero, a 26-year-old photographer and art director whose body of work can be described as visual celebration of the female body. Guerrero usually captures nature- flowers, snow beds, trees leaves and women, usually nude. In an interview she stated her endeavour is to separate sexuality from nudity and establish a new way of living the relationship with our bodies. Both women shot to fame using social media as the platform to explore themselves, their art and gain visibility and agency. The reason behind quoting the above example is to highlight how women are reclaiming cyberspace and finding agency. The internet and especially social media is changing the very nature of what can be considered as text. Writing today does not require paper and printing. This truly can be called the age of the 'non-text' where writing is a purely an electronic experience with the doing away of the need and importance of printing. It is the writer's force of ideas and means of presentation using the visual medium which gets visibility and reach with the interference of the publishing house. With the doing away of printing a new relationship is established between the artist and the audience. In the virtual world a little known or unknown artist publishes alongside a veritable literary celebrity. The hierarchical structures set up by the patriarchal world seem to be diminishing by the way and women are gaining not just a voice but a platform to talk about and discuss issues which were earlier taboo.

Two other platforms used by women as a cathartic experience are the blogs and the groups formed on social media platforms. Many of the women interviewed either had a blog or page of their own on social media sites. Pressures of the family and society at times forced them to be away from some of the creative expressions that they really wanted to pursue. The anonymity of the cyber space provides them with a platform which they can explore and exploit to their advantage. For most women blogs or blogging acts like a mental visit to the gym where they give a creative outlet to themselves and use their latent talent to either find agency and voice in a system that is otherwise famous for gagging their voices and individuality. One finds the presence of many online women's groups which act as soul sharing mediums for women. Women share their deepest aspirations, hopes and dreams, fears and tribulations with other likeminded women and aim to find solace in other likeminded women and their thoughts and opinions. Women's groups have helped many terminally ill and depressed women overcome their ailments and find agency and creative outlet. These groups also provide newly married women and young mothers with a platform to express their doubts about the new roles assigned to them and discuss questions that they could possibly have reservations about sharing. The suggestions and advice given by other women help them deal with specific problems encountered as most women who participate in these discussions are not really known to each other, hence the feeling that the advice is third person and unbiased.

With the unprecedented rise in the use of the internet, the instances of crime using the internet is also spreading its vicious tentacles far and wide. Cybercrime has become a global phenomenon with women and children becoming easy targets to the perpetrators of these crimes. Cyberstalking, cyber bullying, harassment via social media, morphing and message spoofing are examples of crimes being perpetrated on the internet. Most women find themselves easy targets of stalkers and bullies on the internet. These people create fake social media accounts to befriend women and children and get easy access to private information, pictures and other personal details. The anonymity that social media offers and the ability of social media to give a creative and emotional outlet to

people especially women who do not necessarily enjoy these freedoms burdened by their societal roles and expectations makes women and children 'put themselves out' on social media. New age social media apps like snap chat prove to be especially dangerous because participation in these apps means posting through pictures. These pictures most of the time end up being too personal or sexual in nature. Women place a lot of trust on their friends on these platforms and believe the images and text they share in confidence will not be shared or misused by their so-called social media friends but the reality is far from removed. Most reported cases of cyberbullying happen between close friends and relatives. In recent times there has been a spurt in the circulation of rape videos and other acts of physical and sexual abuse. People shoot these videos and circulate them causing a lot of psychological trauma to the women involved.

Another cause of concern is the use of the mobile phone as a security vault. Most people use mobile phones to store and record information, text, images and other private and confidential information as people used to maintain a personal diary in the past. The assurance that most people have is that the mobile has a password which will keep their information safe. But most phones can be easily unlocked by software experts and information stored on the cell phones be easily snooped around by the multiple apps whom we unknowingly authorize and grant access to our personal information when we accept the terms and conditions of the apps we install on our phones and on other platforms of the internet without reading them of understanding the ramifications of our actions.

We need to understand that crime is not new to humankind but cybercrime is and the legal system and we are users of the internet are still underprepared to understand the onslaught of cyber crime. Women are easy targets in the cyber world and the nature of cyber crime changes with the gender of the victim. Cyber Bullying, stalking, morphing slut Shaming, flaming and doxing are forms of cyber crimes that are used extensively on the internet against women in particular. The survey and the interviews revealed 75% women have experienced cyber bullying and stalking in some form. Slut shaming and flaming are two other forms of cyber crime that are extensively being used against women and to silence them. As any keen observer of the internet would notice that most women celebrities are usually either slut shamed or bullied for every act of theirs. Example an actress who puts on weight post pregnancy or wears revealing clothes or expresses her frank opinions about issues is trolled, bullied and slut shamed to silence. Many women celebrities have either reduced or refrain from posting and commenting on social networking sites. One is forced to point out that the leaps that technology has made in the cyber world should have enabled women to sense a feeling of equality and safety in the cyber realm but the reality is that the cyber realm has created its own forms of gendered identities and crime. The crux of the matter being that there is a credibility gap between the promises of Virtual Reality and cyberspace and the quality of what it delivers. The new technological frontier seems to be intensifying the gender-gap and increasing the polarization between the sexes. We seem to be back to the war metaphor, but its location is the real world, not the hyperspace of abstract masculinity. And its protagonists are no computer images, but the real social agents of postindustrial urban landscapes.

The question one needs to ask is when Donna Haraway said "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code." She envisioned a platform for women which would enable them to be themselves in the cyber world. She saw the boundaries of gender being blurred and the vision of a cyborg existence. She thought that she would want to be more of a 'cyborg' than a 'goddess' in cyberspace. The question remains: have we been able to create such a realm in cyberspace? To quote Rosser Sue, "Cyberfeminism can be a critique of equality in cyberspace, challenge the gender stereotype in cyberspace, examine the gender relationship in cyberspace, examine the collaboration between human and technology, and examine the relationship between women and technology and more. For examples: the innovation

of internet has a huge impact on women's lives (Like how the innovation of telephone bought women security from crime and no longer being isolated from geographical constraint), the idea of digital life has been introduced to all users of the internet; but is this new technology liberating or oppressing women? In this sense, we can think of this innovation once again free women from time and space constraints which enable them to become active users on the web. On the other hand, this innovation can possibly oppress women by encouraging cybersex, pornography or prostitution which ultimately makes them more vulnerable. Therefore, Cyberfeminism is the approach to examine these matters." The need of the hour is to critically examine and interrogate gender in cyberspace. The interrogation must happen both at the level of law and at the level of society. We need to re-examine the ways by which women have been re subjected to oppression and violence on the internet. While we do this we need to also applaud and celebrate the ways in which women are reclaiming their identity and existence in cyberspace.

IT for Change, Point of View, and Feminism India work towards creating safe, inclusive, and equitable digital environments; deal with online gender-based violence; and empower marginalized groups-most of all, women-through reframing digital rights and policies and shifting mainstream discourse on the use of the Internet. IT for Change is an organization based in Bangalore, formed in 2000, that focuses on using information and communication technologies to promote social change for women and marginalized communities. IT for Change sees technology as a great leveler if steered towards inclusion and empowerment. Many of the projects they work on revolve around policy advocacy, knowledge production, and grassroots projects that imagine new forms of digital rights in favor of gender equity. IT for Change played a important I role in influencing policy debates on internet governance and was quite instrumental in pushing for frameworks that provide a context to challenges concerning women's issues online. For example, their reports on "misogyny and cyberviolence" within India were, to a large extent, enlightened about the intersectionality of technology and gender violence. The organization has attended the UN's Internet Governance Forum and other circles that shape policies as an advocate for digital policy frameworks toward women's protection against cyberbullying, doxxing, and other forms of online violence.

The "Feminist Digital Justice Project" is the kind of endeavor that has assailed ICTs under scrutiny as to how women's work inside digital spaces, particularly in informal or unregulated sectors, is undervalued and underpaid. Through such research on exploitation within digital gig work-such as content moderation, social media management, and freelance work- IT for Change highlights the importance of fair remuneration and recognition of digital economies for women's labor. The organization has developed several toolkits and resources guiding the provision of safe online spaces as well as responses to issues on online harassment. This work is placed in a feminist framework that seeks to address power imbalances, particularly in how digital interactions and platforms are regulated and managed.

PoV is an organisation based in Mumbai; it works actively on gender, sexuality and digital rights especially concerning women's and LGBTQIA+ communities. Founded in 1996, PoV's work ranges from low-level workshops to global forums on digital rights. The organisation is famous for a rather unique approach towards advocacy: using digital storytelling, art, and participatory media to amplify voices that have been ignored or muffled from the margins. PoV has also designed several resources related to the online harassment and abuse that woman and LGBTQIA+ face. Their project called Digital Defenders ensures that women are equipped with defense mechanisms through training and toolkits. The set of tools and workshops empower women to ensure safety and to further advocate for supportive digital policies in order to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable on digital platforms and harassed victims have access to reporting mechanisms. Campaigns, workshops, and participatory media are PoV's way of challenging stories around gender and sexuality in mainstream narratives, besides creating opportunities for alternative stories and marginalized voices. PoV collaborates with local artists, activists, and writers to produce

content that centers the experiences of women, especially those from more vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds, which enable them to tell their stories, experiences, and many more things.

Feminism in India (FII) is a web-based platform dedicated to the creation of feminist media content, developing online communities of feminists, and education on issues related to gender equality. Founded in 2014, FII seeks to address patriarchy by creating public debates about issues related to gender through an inclusive lens, raising awareness of gender issues, and spreading feminist perspectives. FII designs educational content that is extensive and includes topics from consent, mental health, intersectional feminism, to LGBTQIA+ issues. Their campaigns, such as #DigitalHifazat, aim at promoting online safety to teach women and marginalized communities best practices to stay safe online. This creates savvy tools to comprehend and negotiate issues as intricate and complex as online privacy, data protection, and cyber violence based on gender. More than that, FII emphasizes intersectionality because different women have different problems. To expand the Indian feminist discourse, FII aims to document stories by and about Dalit women, queer, and women with disabilities. Their content often happens to be beyond gender, finding a way to encapsulate caste, class, religion, and sexuality toward a better understanding of gender inequality. FII maintains a significant social media presence and operates an active blog. It has, therefore, fostered a community of feminists, activists, and allies who keep discussing gender justice. Through such a shared space where people can narrate their experiences to support each other, FII has built a network of solidarity enabling women and marginalized voices online.

These organizations not only promote gender justice online but also partake in a larger social action for a more safe and inclusive digital space. Together, these organizations work synergistically: IT for Change policy advocacy puts in place structural support for gendered rights; Point of View on matters of sexuality and digital expression have to do with de-stigmatizing important aspects of women's lives; Feminism in India content creations and community-building measure create solidarity and enhance awareness. Here are some broader areas where their combined efforts have created impact: These organizations bring issues of gender to the mainstream, shaping the public discourse around digital rights in a way that often pushes mainstream media and policymakers to not only see but also act against instances of online misogyny, data privacy, and digital harassment. These efforts made it more visible and brought attention to issues like revenge porn, cyberbullying, and gendered trolling. Such issues are now more debated and widely covered. The efforts of IT for Change, Point of View, and Feminism India represent a vibrant digital feminist movement in India. They advocate for gender equity on the internet. By addressing some of the challenges women face in cyberspace-from gender-based violence to restricted self-expression-these organizations will help create a space where women can be free and have a voice in the digital space. They are doing much more than making the internet a safer place; they are revolutionizing the way gender and technology intersect to create a more inclusive, equitable, and just digital future for all genders. It testifies to how digital platforms do not only aid in socializing but are an embodiment of systemic change. As they empower women, especially young women, the digital space would finally become a more confident and resilient place to dwell in with appropriate technology use, helping achieve the notion of wider gender equality across the digital divide. Together, they foster a digital environment that allows women's voices, rights, and experiences to be heard and protected.

4.5 Conclusion

The research addresses the nuanced experience of women in digital spaces and how they actively reformulate their identities online. It is based on theories of digital and cyber feminism, making clear that the democratizing potential of the internet does not mean that gender norms are eradicated online or that women exercise agency without limits of structure. Hayles (2000) and Lister et al. (2009) offer some important frameworks for understanding

how gender plays out in digital spaces, including the potentiality afforded and the limitations to women's practices within such a space. To the engineering students interviewed, digital platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter represent arenas through which they enact self-presentation, experiment with new forms of self-expression, and actively make over professional and personal identities. Lister et al. (2009) point to the web as a domain where one can express and seek one's identity in ways that differ from those found elsewhere in the offline world. In this respect, the research uncovers the fact that on the internet, young women can create specific identities by fusing professional, academic, and personal fronts. For example, students may manage LinkedIn profiles that subvert more traditional feminine constructs of selfhood. They are quite active at presenting themselves on these platforms as engineers in a profession that still reeks of sexism. In short, these women might share thoughts on gender issues, discuss technical topics or interests, or express their artistic inclinations on Instagram or Twitter.

Even though these online interactions give the space to investigate identities, they also establish the ways in which old expectations on gender behavior are also current in the online context. Katherine Hayles's "embodiment in the digital age" implies that even a disembodied virtual self still experiences the cultural norms and expectations (Hayles, 2000). This is seen in the manner in which students interviewed reported managing their online presence to create a self so that they don't get backlash or have to face judgement. They observed that there was an implicit pressure to "filter" their identities, hiding some elements so that they could appear "professional" or "acceptable." For instance, while some celebrated their technical achievements openly, others kept their opinions on sensitive topics like feminism or social issues locked up tight out of fear of judgment that might eventually hamper their prospects professionally." While digital spaces provide a form of liberation, such spaces are not free from societal limitations.

Under these conditions, even some of the most radical forms of cyberspace tend to be somewhat infused with traditional gender norms, bringing subtle pressures to change the way women present themselves and engage in interactions online. For example, students often felt that they had to provide some sort of "presentable" version of themselves, not necessarily reflecting the expectations or ideals of femininity and professionalism. This negotiation corresponds to Judith Butler's interpretations of "gender performativity", where gender is performed through a never-ending series of acts that are informed by social norms and expectation. This sets the stage for students to consciously or unconsciously manage their self-presentation in alignment with gendered expectations even in the most liberating, open online spaces. Cyberfeminism, which focuses on the nexus between gender and technology, seems to enlighten this practice.

Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant had rightly articulated the point that though digital platforms may provide a neutral space, social conditioning and gendered norms do exist in these spaces. Students interviewed frequently felt that they experienced surveillance, even in the private spaces they curated for themselves, like private social media accounts. This corresponds to what Haraway calls the "cyborg" paradox: women may, in online settings, be freeing themselves of particular physical constraints but are nevertheless bound by unseen social contracts that enforce standards for legitimate forms of self-expression. One of the most fascinating findings is how learners are using digital technology to create communities and connect with others.

Nancy Fraser in *Counterpublic theory* describes how marginalized groups are able to build alternative public spheres which allow them to have discourse outside the dominant social structures. For these students, online spaces function as counterpublics, spaces where they can engage with matters of gender, give voice to their concerns regarding the exclusion of others by technology, and connect to fellow women in STEM fields. For example, a few mentioned creating online groups or joining feminist and STEM-centered forums where they could discuss topics marginalized in the mainstream. These counterpublics facilitate displays of solidarity, offering some

modicum of safety in speaking and listening, thus building networks of support, as has been documented in research on digital feminist collectives, for instance, by Banet-Weiser (2018). Organizations such as Feminism in India and Point of View, based in India, which work for gender equality and inclusivity online, have pointed out the utility of these counterpublics.

These spaces were important support networks for students, and experiences and stories often not heard in traditional settings were brought to the fore. Despite these welcoming online communities, these very students reported that even today, they were still careful about expressing opinions on sensitive topics because online abuse and backlash are concerns. Digital counterpublics provide only a semblance of solidarity but are not entirely relieved of the dangers that bar self-expression, such as online misogyny, trolling, and shaming. These digital arenas seem to play a contradictory role in which women both exercise agency and face limits.

CHAPTER 5

NEGOTIATED AGENCY AND DIGITAL CONSTRAINT

5.1 Introduction

Research on digital media use has often been conducted to support issues of access, inclusion, and technological progress. In most of these studies, indicators such as device ownership, frequency of use, and platform participation are treated as factors for empowerment. Feminist scholarship has repeatedly challenged this assumption, arguing that numerical indicators alone cannot capture how power operates through gendered social relations, institutional regulation, and cultural norms. This chapter responds to that critique by offering an analysis that treats quantitative data not as neutral evidence of behaviour, but as a site through which structural constraints, negotiated agency, and everyday discipline become visible.

Drawing on survey data collected from young women students, the chapter examines patterns of digital access, platform use, privacy practices, safety strategies, and political expression. Rather than presenting these patterns as isolated variables, the analysis consolidates them through relational and correlational interpretation. The objective is not prediction or generalisation, but explanation: to understand how different dimensions of digital life cohere into a structured experience shaped by gender, class, domestic authority, and platform governance. The primary argument being that young women's digital agency is best understood as negotiated rather than autonomous. High levels of access coexist with systematic restraint. Extensive connectivity operates alongside self-surveillance. Awareness of rights and risks does not translate into formal action. These are not contradictions to be resolved, but empirical manifestations of how power is lived within contemporary digital environments.

Feminist critiques have long questioned the assumption that numbers speak for themselves. Quantitative data are produced within specific epistemological frameworks that privilege measurability, coherence, and individualised responses. Feminist methodology, by contrast, insists on reading data relationally, attending to silences, inconsistencies, and patterned ambivalence. In this chapter, statistical findings are interpreted as expressions of social structure rather than individual disposition. Correlations are used not to imply causality, but to illuminate how variables cluster together in meaningful ways. For example, patterns linking time spent online with restrained public participation are read as indicators of intensified self-regulation rather than excessive use. Similarly, associations between safety awareness and low levels of formal reporting are interpreted as evidence of institutional mistrust rather than ignorance. This approach deliberately resists the reduction of complex social experiences into behavioural explanations. Instead, it foregrounds the conditions under which particular responses become likely, acceptable, or unthinkable. Feminist statistical analysis, as employed here, is therefore interpretive, critical, and reflexive. The dataset comprises responses from undergraduate women students enrolled in a technical institution, representing a population with relatively high levels of digital access and literacy. Variables include device ownership, internet connectivity, duration of online engagement, platform usage patterns, privacy practices, experiences of online harm, safety responses, legal awareness, and political expression. Rather than analysing each variable in isolation, the chapter consolidates findings through comparative and correlational reasoning. Relationships between variables are examined to identify structural tendencies. For instance, correlations between platform visibility and reporting behaviour are used to explore how public participation relates to perceived risk. Similarly, associations between domestic access conditions and privacy practices illuminate how offline power relations shape online behaviour. Where statistical patterns appear contradictory, these contradictions are treated

as analytically significant. Feminist research recognises that women often navigate power through accommodation, silence, and strategic ambiguity.

5.2 Access

The data indicate near-universal access to smartphones and regular internet connectivity among respondents. From an infrastructural perspective, this suggests that barriers related to device availability and basic access have largely been overcome for this group. However, feminist analysis requires moving beyond access as possession to access as condition. Correlational patterns reveal that device ownership does not equate to unrestricted autonomy. Respondents who reported shared domestic spaces or familial oversight were significantly more likely to adopt stringent privacy practices, including password protection and selective platform engagement. This relationship indicates that access is mediated by domestic authority, surveillance, and expectations of respectability. Rather than functioning as tools of unqualified freedom, digital devices operate within existing power arrangements. Connectivity enables participation, but only insofar as it aligns with acceptable norms of behaviour. Access, in this sense, is better understood as a conditioned possibility rather than an emancipatory resource.

5.3 Time Spent Online and the Intensification of Self-Regulation

One of the most striking patterns in the dataset is the high level of daily digital engagement. A majority of respondents reported spending several hours online each day, with a substantial proportion exceeding five hours. Conventional interpretations might frame such figures as evidence of dependency or overuse. This chapter rejects that framing. Statistical associations between time spent online and platform behaviour indicate that extended engagement correlates with increased reliance on private communication channels rather than heightened public visibility. In other words, greater connectivity is linked not to expressive excess, but to careful management of interaction. This suggests that time online is absorbed by academic coordination, emotional labour, and relational maintenance rather than performative self-display. From a feminist perspective, this pattern reflects the intensification of self-regulation rather than loss of control. Digital time is structured by obligation, responsiveness, and vigilance. The normalisation of prolonged connectivity obscures the labour embedded within it, rendering digital saturation both necessary and unremarkable.

5.4 Platform Differentiation and Stratified Participation

Analysis of platform use reveals a stratified pattern of participation. Messaging applications dominate everyday communication, while platforms associated with public visibility are used more selectively. Correlational analysis indicates that respondents who actively use multiple platforms are also more likely to restrict the type and frequency of content they share publicly. This relationship underscores the role of anticipatory judgement in shaping digital behaviour. Women do not withdraw from platforms entirely; instead, they differentiate their participation according to perceived risk. Public-facing spaces are approached cautiously, while private or semi-private channels are treated as safer environments for interaction. Such stratification challenges assumptions that platform multiplicity equates to expanded voice. Instead, it reveals a layered digital landscape in which participation is unevenly distributed across spaces, with visibility carefully rationed.

5.5 Privacy Practices and the Gendered Management of Access

Analysis of privacy-related responses indicates that concerns about personal data security and unwanted access are widespread among respondents. An overwhelming majority, exceeding ninety percent, reported using password protection on their personal digital devices. This near-universal adoption of basic security measures suggests that privacy is not perceived as optional but as a necessary condition of digital participation. Further analysis reveals that this practice is not merely technical but socially embedded. Approximately three-quarters of respondents indicated that they take additional steps to prevent others from accessing their devices, including frequent password changes or avoidance of device sharing. These practices were more prevalent among respondents who reported living in shared domestic spaces, indicating a strong association between household arrangements and digital self-protection. Rather than signalling paranoia or excessive caution, these patterns point to a gendered environment in which privacy must be actively produced and maintained. Digital privacy, in this context, functions as a form of everyday labour, undertaken in anticipation of scrutiny rather than in response to explicit violation.

5.6 Domestic Surveillance and Conditional Autonomy

While device ownership is nearly universal, autonomy over device use is unevenly distributed. Approximately two-thirds of respondents reported that their internet use is subject to some form of informal monitoring, including parental questioning, restrictions on usage time, or expectations regarding appropriate content. Only a minority, fewer than one-third, reported experiencing complete freedom from such oversight. Correlational analysis indicates that respondents who experience higher levels of domestic monitoring are significantly more likely to restrict their online visibility. These respondents were less likely to post publicly, engage in open discussions, or participate in politically expressive content. Instead, they favoured private messaging platforms and limited-audience interactions. This relationship demonstrates that digital autonomy cannot be inferred from access alone. Domestic power relations extend into digital space, shaping how and where women feel able to participate. Autonomy is therefore conditional, negotiated within familial structures rather than exercised independently.

5.7 Passwords, Secrecy, and Feminist Interpretations of Safety

When asked about motivations for password use, a majority of respondents cited concerns related to misuse of information, impersonation, or unauthorised access. Notably, fewer than one-quarter framed password protection primarily in terms of protection from cybercrime by unknown actors. Instead, the dominant concern related to familiar or proximate forms of access. This distinction is analytically important. It suggests that the primary perceived threat does not originate from abstract external dangers but from everyday environments in which women's digital practices may be questioned or regulated. Passwords thus function as boundary-making tools within intimate and institutional contexts. From a feminist methodological standpoint, this pattern reinforces the argument that safety is relational rather than purely technological. Digital security practices are shaped by social proximity and power, not merely by awareness of online risk.

5.8 Time Online, Visibility, and Self-Restriction

Data on time spent online show that approximately sixty percent of respondents spend between two and five hours online each day, while roughly one-quarter report spending between five and ten hours. A smaller group, under ten percent, reported engagement exceeding ten hours daily. When these figures are analysed alongside platform participation patterns, a notable relationship emerges. Respondents in the higher time-use categories were not more likely to engage in public posting or visible expression. Instead, they demonstrated greater reliance on

messaging applications and passive consumption of content. This inverse relationship between time spent online and public visibility challenges assumptions that prolonged digital engagement leads to increased expression. On the contrary, the data suggest that extended connectivity is associated with heightened self-monitoring and strategic withdrawal from visibility. Time online is thus absorbed by maintenance work rather than expressive freedom.

5.9 Platform Use and Layered Participation

Analysis of platform usage reveals that nearly all respondents use multiple digital platforms, with messaging applications approaching universal use. However, fewer than half reported regular engagement with platforms that require public posting or profile-based visibility. Among respondents who reported frequent use of public-facing platforms, only a minority engaged in active content creation. The majority limited their participation to browsing, liking, or sharing within restricted networks. This pattern was particularly pronounced among respondents who also reported domestic monitoring or concerns about reputational harm. These findings indicate that platform multiplicity does not translate into equal participation across spaces. Instead, women distribute their engagement strategically, reserving expressive activity for environments perceived as safer or more controllable.

5.10 Privacy as Labour, Not Preference

Taken together, these percentage-based patterns demonstrate that privacy practices among respondents are neither incidental nor individually idiosyncratic. They represent a collective response to environments characterised by surveillance, judgement, and conditional acceptance. More than eighty percent of respondents reported actively thinking about who might see their online activity before posting. This anticipatory calculation underscores the emotional and cognitive labour involved in digital participation. Privacy, in this context, is not a default state but an ongoing achievement. This shows that privacy functions as a gendered form of labour, shaped by domestic power relations, platform design, and social expectations.

5.11 Awareness of Harm and the Ambiguity of Experience

Responses related to online harm reveal a complex pattern of awareness without certainty. While a clear majority of respondents, close to seventy percent, stated that they had not experienced sexual harassment online, a substantial minority, approaching one-quarter, indicated uncertainty about whether particular interactions constituted harassment. A smaller but significant group, approximately ten percent, reported explicit experiences of harassment. From a feminist analytical perspective, this distribution is instructive. The presence of uncertainty at this scale suggests not confusion but interpretive labour. Digital interactions often blur boundaries between acceptable attention and intrusion, humour and insult, visibility and vulnerability. The data indicate that a sizeable proportion of respondents encounter behaviour that is uncomfortable yet difficult to categorise within dominant understandings of harm. This ambiguity should not be read as evidence of safety. Instead, it reflects the normalisation of intrusive and gendered behaviour within digital environments, where women are expected to tolerate a degree of discomfort as a condition of participation.

5.12 Correlating Harassment with Visibility and Platform Use

When responses related to harassment are analysed alongside platform participation, a discernible pattern emerges. Respondents who reported higher levels of public-facing platform use were more likely to report either direct experiences of harassment or uncertainty regarding harmful interactions. In contrast, those who limited their participation primarily to private messaging platforms were significantly less likely to report such experiences. This

association suggests that visibility functions as a risk amplifier rather than a neutral condition of participation. Increased exposure does not simply create opportunities for expression; it also intensifies vulnerability to scrutiny, judgement, and intrusion. The data thus support feminist critiques of digital visibility as an unevenly distributed resource, one that carries disproportionate costs for women. Importantly, this relationship does not imply that visibility causes harm in a deterministic sense. Rather, it indicates that platform architectures and cultural norms combine to render certain forms of participation more hazardous than others.

5.13 Blocking and Reporting as Informal Safety Practices

Despite relatively low levels of explicitly reported harassment, more than half of the respondents indicated that they had blocked or reported other users at least once. This discrepancy between the naming of harm and the enactment of protective behaviour is analytically significant. Blocking and reporting appear to function as preventative or precautionary measures rather than responses to clearly defined incidents. Respondents act to preserve boundaries even when they do not frame their experiences as harassment. This pattern highlights the extent to which women are required to manage risk proactively in digital spaces. Correlational analysis indicates that respondents who reported uncertainty about harassment were just as likely to use blocking features as those who reported direct harm. This finding reinforces the argument that ambiguity itself generates labour. Women must decide when discomfort warrants action, often in the absence of institutional guidance or support.

5.14 Structural Design and the Individualisation of Safety

Feminist critiques of platform governance provide an important interpretive framework for these findings. Scholars such as Safiya Umoja Noble have demonstrated that digital platforms are structured in ways that prioritise engagement and growth over user safety. Moderation tools, while necessary, place responsibility for harm management on individuals rather than institutions. The data analysed here align with this critique. While a majority of respondents demonstrate awareness of online risk and appropriate safety responses, far fewer engage with formal mechanisms of redress. Less than one-quarter reported ever accessing official cybercrime reporting platforms, despite widespread acknowledgement of their existence. This gap between awareness and action suggests a lack of trust in institutional remedies. Reporting is perceived as burdensome, ineffective, or potentially risky, particularly for young women navigating reputational and familial concerns.

5.15 Legal Awareness and Calculated Inaction

Approximately two-thirds of respondents indicated awareness of cybercrime laws and digital safety regulations. However, this awareness does not translate into engagement with legal processes. The overwhelming majority have never filed a formal complaint, even when encountering distressing interactions. This pattern reflects calculated inaction rather than ignorance. Legal processes often require sustained engagement, documentation, and exposure, all of which carry social and emotional costs. For many respondents, these costs outweigh the perceived benefits of reporting, particularly in cases where harm is ambiguous or socially minimised. Rights that exist in principle may remain inaccessible in practice, especially when institutional responses fail to account for gendered power dynamics.

5.16 Silence, Avoidance, and Strategic Withdrawal

In response to perceived risk, respondents adopt strategies that prioritise self-preservation over participation. More than half reported avoiding certain topics, platforms, or interactions to minimise negative experiences. A similar proportion indicated that they think carefully about potential reactions before engaging publicly online. These

strategies are not evenly distributed. Respondents who reported prior experiences of discomfort or uncertainty regarding harassment were significantly more likely to restrict their participation. This correlation indicates that exposure to harm, even when unnamed, reshapes digital behaviour over time. Silence and withdrawal thus function as rational adaptations within environments perceived as unsafe. However, they also represent a loss of voice and visibility, reinforcing existing gendered exclusions from public discourse.

5.17 Feminist Interpretation of Statistical Contradiction

The coexistence of high safety awareness, low formal reporting, and widespread informal boundary-making reveals a central contradiction in the dataset. Rather than weakening the analysis, this contradiction strengthens it. Feminist methodology recognises that women often navigate power through compromise, ambiguity, and strategic silence. The statistical patterns observed reveal that harm is both present and managed quietly. Women adapt to digital environments by limiting exposure rather than seeking redress. This adaptive behaviour, while effective at the individual level, allows structural conditions to remain unchallenged. The findings indicate that online harm is not experienced as an exceptional event but as a background condition that shapes participation. Risk is anticipated rather than encountered, managed rather than reported, and absorbed rather than externalised.

5.18 Political Expression and the Thresholds of Participation

Engagement with political and social issues online presents a revealing contrast within the dataset. While a clear majority of respondents, approximately seventy percent, reported that they consume political or social content on digital platforms, far fewer translate this exposure into active expression. Less than one-third indicated that they regularly share, comment on, or create content related to political or social issues. This disparity between consumption and expression highlights the presence of participation thresholds. Digital platforms facilitate access to information, yet they do not guarantee voice. The data suggest that political awareness is widespread, but public articulation is constrained by perceived risk, potential backlash, and concerns about misinterpretation. This gap reflects the gendered costs of visibility in political discourse. Expression is not withheld due to apathy but managed in response to anticipated consequences.

5.19 Correlating Political Expression with Safety and Visibility

When analysed in relation to safety-related variables, political expression appears closely linked to perceptions of risk. Respondents who reported experiences of discomfort, harassment, or uncertainty regarding online interactions were significantly less likely to engage in public political expression. Among this group, fewer than twenty percent reported posting political content, compared to nearly forty percent among respondents who reported no such concerns. This correlation suggests that exposure to harm has a chilling effect on participation. Political expression becomes conditional upon a sense of safety that is unevenly distributed across users. The data indicate that women who have reason to perceive digital spaces as hostile are more likely to retreat from public discourse, even when they remain politically aware. Such patterns reinforce feminist critiques of the digital public sphere as formally open but substantively exclusionary.

5.20 Domestic Contexts and the Regulation of Voice

Domestic power relations also shape political participation online. Respondents who reported higher levels of familial monitoring or questioning were markedly less likely to engage in political expression. Fewer than one-quarter of these respondents shared political views online, compared to nearly half among those who reported minimal domestic oversight. This association highlights the entanglement of offline authority and online voice.

Political expression is not only a matter of individual conviction but also of social permission. Within domestic contexts that prioritise conformity and reputational management, silence functions as a protective strategy.

5.21 Silence as a Gendered Strategy, Not Absence of Opinion

A common misinterpretation of low levels of political posting is to equate silence with disengagement. The data analysed here challenge this assumption. While fewer than one-third of respondents actively express political views online, a much larger proportion engage with political content privately, discuss issues in closed networks, or reflect on them individually. Approximately sixty percent of respondents indicated that they prefer to discuss political or sensitive issues in private settings rather than on public platforms. This preference correlates strongly with concerns about conflict, misrepresentation, and long-term digital traces. Silence, in this context, should be understood as a gendered strategy rather than a lack of political interest. Women manage their participation by relocating it to spaces perceived as safer and more controllable.

5.22 Platform Design and the Amplification of Risk

The reluctance to engage publicly must also be understood in relation to platform design. Public-facing platforms amplify content through metrics, algorithmic visibility, and audience collapse. These features intensify the consequences of expression, making even minor statements potentially far-reaching and permanent. Statistical patterns in the dataset indicate that respondents who are most conscious of digital permanence are significantly less likely to post politically expressive content. Over two-thirds of respondents reported thinking about the future implications of their posts, including employability, family reaction, and social standing. This anticipatory calculation further raises the threshold for participation. Expression is weighed not only against immediate reaction but against imagined future scrutiny.

5.23 Negotiated Agency in the Digital Public Sphere

Taken together, the findings in this section demonstrate that agency in digital political participation is exercised through negotiation rather than assertion. Women assess risks, evaluate contexts, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This negotiation is continuous, shaped by past experiences, anticipated reactions, and structural constraints. The statistical evidence shows that political silence is patterned, not random. It correlates with safety concerns, domestic regulation, platform visibility, and awareness of reputational risk. These correlations indicate that silence is socially produced rather than individually chosen. From a feminist methodological standpoint, recognising silence as data is essential. It reveals how power operates through constraint rather than prohibition.

Digital platforms do not function as neutral arenas for political participation. While they expand access to information, they also intensify the costs of expression. For young women, these costs are unevenly distributed and closely tied to gendered expectations of behaviour, respectability, and safety. The analysis reveals that political engagement is widespread in private and passive forms but restricted in public and visible ones. This pattern challenges optimistic accounts of digital democracy and underscores the need for feminist analyses that attend to both participation and its limits.

CHAPTER 6

GENDER, DIGITAL NEGOTIATION, AND FEMINIST FUTURES

6.1 Reframing the Research Problem

This research investigates the dynamics of gender within digital environments, with particular attention to how young urban women in India navigate, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities amid the complexities they experience while navigating the internet. Rather than conceptualizing the internet exclusively as a site of empowerment or harm, the study emphasizes women's everyday digital practices as negotiations shaped by structural inequalities, cultural norms, platform architectures, and institutional gaps. A central challenge addressed is the limited scholarship grounded in the lived experiences of women in the Global South. Existing literature on gender and digital media is largely informed by Global North perspectives, often overlooking the specificities of Indian socio-cultural contexts, including class stratification, familial authority, caste-based norms, and unequal access to technology (Vaidehi et al., 2021). By focusing on young women studying in an engineering institution in Mumbai, this work provides both empirical and theoretical contributions to this underexplored field.

6.2 Methodological Reflections and Research Challenges

Researching women's digital lives presented methodological challenges. Although participants showed high technological literacy and access to digital devices, they were initially hesitant to discuss experiences of harassment, surveillance, or constraint. This reluctance emerged as a critical finding, illustrating how silence, minimization, and strategic ambiguity function as protective strategies in contexts where visibility entails social and emotional risks. (Pandey, 2025). Establishing trust required extended dialogue through orientation sessions, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. In alignment with feminist methodological principles, the research process affirmed the relational nature of knowledge production. The gradual willingness of participants to share experiences of cyber harassment, self-censorship, and identity negotiation highlight the limitations of superficial inquiry and the necessity of sustained, reflexive research design. (Mukherjee, 2023)

6.3 Digital Access and the Illusion of Unqualified Empowerment

The findings reveal that urban young women in India currently have unprecedented access to digital technologies. Smartphones, affordable data plans, and social media platforms are an integral part of daily routines, facilitating access to education, professional opportunities, and global information networks (Alam et al., 2025). Online courses, webinars, and remote work have further expanded opportunities for learning, earning, and participation beyond geographic boundaries (Braesemann et al., 2021). Nevertheless, increased access does not eliminate constraints, nor does it guarantee autonomy. Digital participation remains shaped by domestic surveillance, expectations of respectability, and anticipatory self-regulation. (Pandey, 2025, pp. 897-901) Women curate their online presence with care, balancing self-expression and caution. (PTI, 2023) Privacy practices such as password protection and selective sharing serve not only as technical measures but also as strategies for establishing boundaries within socially regulated environments (Kim et al., 2025).

6.4 Identity, Self-Fashioning, and Impression Management

Digital platforms play a central role in identity construction and self-refashioning. Social media, blogs, and short-form video platforms enable women to experiment with self-presentation, articulate aspirations, and challenge traditional gender roles. (Gowda, 2023) These practices are similar to Erving Goffman's concept of impression management, wherein individuals actively shape social perception. In digital contexts, impression management is accompanied by surveillance, permanence, and audience collapse. Women intentionally select images, language, and themes to project empowerment while conforming to social norms. This process reveals both agency and constraint. Although visibility can provide recognition and connection, it also exposes women to judgment, harassment, and reputational risk.

6.5 Digital Spaces as Counter Publics and Sites of Resistance

Despite these constraints, the research reveals that digital platforms function as counterpublic spaces for women. Online feminist communities, activist networks, and hashtag movements facilitate the expression of experiences often silenced offline, including gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, body politics, and mental health challenges. (Gangoli, 2024) Drawing on Nancy Fraser, these digital formations are conceptualized as counterpublics that challenge dominant narratives and expand public discourse. Campaigns such as #MeToo, #WhyLoiter, #PijarTod, and #LahuKarang exemplify how collective digital action can render marginalized experiences visible. For many participants, engagement in these spaces fostered confidence, developed political vocabulary, and cultivated solidarity that extended into offline interactions, professional environments, and interpersonal relationships. (Madhava, 2023, pp. 79-87)

6.6 Harm, Harassment, and the Cost of Visibility

Simultaneously, the internet remains a contested space. Cyber harassment, trolling, stalking, and slut-shaming are persistent aspects of women's digital experiences. (Lal et al., 2024, pp. 1-14) These harms are structurally embedded within platform economies that prioritize engagement over effective abuse prevention. (al. et al., 2025, pp. 85-100) The psychological effects of sustained online hostility are significant, often resulting in anxiety, exhaustion, and self-censorship. (Gupta, 2025) While some women confront harassment directly or mobilize collective resistance, many adopt withdrawal and silence to safeguard their well-being. Such withdrawal constitutes a substantial loss, limiting access to opportunities that digital platforms are intended to provide. (Riya & Nikore, 2022) Feminist theorists like Donna Haraway emphasize that technology is not neutral; it can reinforce patriarchal power or serve as a site of resistance. Women's adaptive strategies reveal resilience but also highlight the inadequacy of systems that shift the responsibility for safety onto users rather than institutions. (Safetipin, 2021)

6.7 Governance, Law, and Institutional Limits

There is a substantial gap between the existence of legal frameworks and their practical effectiveness. Although India has enacted measures such as the Information Technology Act, intermediary guidelines, and cybercrime reporting mechanisms, awareness and utilization remain limited (Khan, 2025). Procedural complexity, lack of trust in enforcement, and fear of social repercussions deter many women from seeking formal redress. (R, 2025) Despite extensive government initiatives and training programs, the persistence and escalation of cybercrime targeting women and children indicate systemic shortcomings (R, 2025, pp. 302-316). Legal remedies alone are insufficient without concurrent cultural change, platform accountability, and feminist-informed governance. (Bharthur & Aggarwal, 2021)

Women's digital lives are characterized by ongoing negotiation rather than binary conditions of empowerment or victimhood. Agency is exercised within constraint; silence may be strategic, withdrawal rational, and visibility both enabling and risky. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles' concept of embodied virtuality, the research affirms the profound interconnection between digital and physical realities. (Hayles, n.d.) Online self-refashioning shapes offline confidence, relationships, and aspirations, even as offline power structures regulate digital expression. (Imam et al., 2025, pp. 2144-2152) Urban young women in India are not passive technology users; they are critical navigators of complex environments, creating spaces for voice, resistance, and solidarity while managing risk and constraint. (Pandey, 2025) Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing feminist approaches to digital policy, platform design, and education. (Kalbarczyk et al., 2025)

The internet presents transformative potential for women, yet it is not inherently liberatory. (Pal & De', 2021) Realising this potential requires sustained feminist intervention that addresses structural inequality, platform accountability, digital literacy, and cultural norms. (Pal & De', 2021) This research highlights the need for such interventions and affirms the necessity of centring women's lived experiences in the pursuit of more just and inclusive digital futures. (Raj & Juned, 2022, pp. 531-549)

6.8 Recommendations and Future Scope of the Study

The findings of this research indicate the need for interventions that move beyond narrow understandings of digital inclusion as mere access to technology. While young urban women increasingly participate in digital spaces, meaningful participation requires safer environments, stronger institutional support, and gender-sensitive digital governance. There is also a pressing need for stronger collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and technology companies. Platform accountability mechanisms should be more transparent, accessible, and responsive to gender-based harassment. Reporting systems must be simplified, and institutional responses should prioritize survivor-centred approaches rather than placing the burden of safety entirely on users. Legal frameworks alone cannot address digital violence unless accompanied by broader cultural shifts that challenge misogyny, victim-blaming, and restrictive gender norms. The study further highlights the importance of feminist approaches to technology design and policy formulation. Women, particularly from marginalized social locations, must be included not only as users of technology but also as decision-makers in technological development, governance, and regulatory processes. Greater representation in these spaces may contribute to more inclusive and equitable digital ecosystems.

Future research can expand on this work by engaging with more diverse demographics across caste, class, religion, sexuality, disability, and rural and urban locations. Comparative studies between metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts may reveal important differences in digital negotiation and access. There is also a need to engage with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, biometric surveillance, and algorithmic governance, particularly in relation to gendered inequalities and digital autonomy in contemporary India

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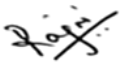
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This is to certify that the monograph entitled: **“Refashioning of the Self: Constraint and Agency of Young Women in the Digital World”** is prepared by **Rajni Nair** based on the thesis entitled: **“Gender in Cyberspace: A Study of Refashioning of the Self Among Urban Women”** submitted to **Research Center for Women’s Studies**, SNDT Women’s University for the award of PhD degree under my guidance.

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About the Monograph

In an increasingly connected world, digital spaces have become important arenas for identity formation, self-expression, and social engagement. This monograph explores how young urban women navigate the opportunities and challenges of the digital world, examining the ways in which they construct, negotiate, and refashion their sense of self online. Drawing on perspectives from digital and cyber feminism, it highlights the transformative potential of technology in fostering agency, empowerment, and gender advocacy, while also addressing persistent concerns related to online harassment, surveillance, and privacy. By examining the intersection of gender, technology, and identity, the work offers valuable insights for researchers, educators, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding women's experiences in contemporary digital cultures.

ISBN: 978-93-48606-02-0



Publisher

SNDT Women's University Press

Bharatratna Maharshi Karve Vidyavihar,

Mumbai Churchgate Campus,

1, Nathibai Thackersey Road, Mumbai 400020