



Empowered by the Feed: WhatsApp, Instagram, and the Reconfiguration of Women's Digital Agency

Dr. Debobani Biswas

Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Neotia University, West Bengal.

Dr Aliya Halim

Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Neotia University, West Bengal

Abstract: This paper investigates the ways in which social media platforms, especially WhatsApp and Instagram have reshaped women's digital agency in present-day India. It contends that routine digital interactions now operate as meaningful sites of empowerment, self-articulation, and collective engagement. Drawing on feminist media theory and digital culture studies, the paper argues that platform features such as curated feeds, visual storytelling, and networked communication allow Indian women to renegotiate visibility, voice, and authority beyond the constraints of conventional socio-cultural frameworks.

The discussion opens by defining digital agency as the ability to participate, self-represent, and mobilise within technologically mediated environments. WhatsApp is examined as a semi-private and community-driven medium that plays a crucial role in enhancing women's participation through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance collectives, and local advocacy networks. Initiatives supported by the state, including Digital Saksharta Abhiyan and SHG-based WhatsApp groups, have enabled women from rural and semi-urban backgrounds to exchange financial knowledge, access government welfare schemes, coordinate entrepreneurial activities, and build networks of mutual support. These practices contribute significantly to both economic independence and social empowerment.

In contrast, Instagram is analysed as a public-facing, visually oriented platform where women actively construct identities, challenge dominant aesthetic norms, and engage in digital entrepreneurship. Women-led enterprises in India, ranging from home-based fashion labels and handicraft businesses to food and wellness ventures use Instagram to circumvent traditional market barriers and establish autonomous economic spaces. The paper also engages with digital feminist campaigns and hashtag movements such as #MeTooIndia, #WomenInBusiness, and #BodyPositivityIndia, which have enabled collective storytelling, resistance, and solidarity.

While recognising these empowering possibilities, the paper also addresses the inherent tensions of digital participation, including online abuse, algorithmic control, surveillance, and content commodification. Nevertheless, it concludes that WhatsApp and Instagram operate as dynamic digital environments that facilitate women's transition from passive users to active agents, enabling new forms of resilience, participation, and socio-cultural transformation in the Indian context.

Keywords: *Digital agency, women and social media, WhatsApp and Instagram, Indian feminist digital culture, online empowerment*

Introduction

The expansion of digital communication technologies over the last decade has significantly reshaped social interaction, cultural expression, and everyday forms of participation. In India, the convergence of affordable smartphones, widespread mobile internet access, and platform-driven social media ecosystems has brought women into new communicative spaces that both extend and complicate their social worlds. WhatsApp and Instagram, in particular, have emerged as dominant platforms through which women engage with family, work, creativity, and public discourse. These platforms are not merely neutral tools of communication; they actively structure how visibility, voice, and participation are negotiated in daily life.

For many Indian women, digital platforms offer possibilities that were previously constrained by spatial, economic, or social limitations. Messaging applications enable sustained networks of support and information-sharing, while visually oriented platforms allow for self-representation and entrepreneurial experimentation. At the same time, women's digital presence remains shaped by patriarchal norms, familial surveillance, caste and class hierarchies, and the moral regulation of female visibility. Online participation does not erase the public-private divide that has historically structured women's lives in India; instead, it reconfigures that divide within platform-specific architectures.

This paper examines how WhatsApp and Instagram reshape women's digital agency in contemporary India by enabling new forms of participation while simultaneously reproducing gendered constraints. Rather than approaching social media as inherently liberating or inherently oppressive, the discussion foregrounds women's everyday negotiations with technology. Agency is treated here not as a fixed condition achieved through access alone but as a situated practice that emerges through interaction with cultural expectations, platform affordances, and lived experience. By focusing on routine digital practices rather than exceptional moments of activism, the paper highlights how empowerment is often incremental, negotiated, and uneven.

Rethinking Agency: Feminist Approaches to Digital Participation

Feminist scholarship has long challenged liberal assumptions that equate agency solely with autonomy, resistance, or individual choice. Such models often fail to account for the ways in which action is shaped by social norms, power relations, and embodied experience. Judith Butler's conceptualisation of agency as emerging through the reiteration and reworking of norms provides a useful framework for understanding women's digital practices, which frequently operate within rather than outside dominant structures (Butler 198). Agency, from this perspective, does not require the rejection of norms but may involve their strategic negotiation.

Saba Mahmood's critique of resistance-centric feminist analysis further complicates conventional understandings of empowerment. By examining forms of ethical self-fashioning that do not conform to liberal feminist expectations, Mahmood demonstrates that agency can manifest through accommodation, discipline, and continuity with tradition (Mahmood 15). This insight is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where women's actions are often evaluated through cultural ideals of respectability, familial duty, and moral conduct.

When applied to digital environments, these feminist insights suggest that women's online participation cannot be assessed solely in terms of visibility or vocal opposition. Digital agency refers instead to the capacity to act meaningfully within technological systems that are themselves structured by corporate interests, algorithmic governance, and surveillance. Platforms shape not only what users can do but also how their actions are recognised and valued. Women's agency on social media must therefore be understood as "platformed," emerging through interaction with design features, metrics, and networked audiences (van Dijck 41).

Methodological Orientation

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in feminist media studies and digital culture research. Rather than presenting original interview-based fieldwork, the analysis synthesises existing empirical studies, policy discussions, and scholarly literature on women's digital practices in India. In addition, the paper draws on sustained observation of publicly accessible Instagram accounts operated by Indian women entrepreneurs, content creators, and activists, as well as documented practices surrounding women-centric WhatsApp groups discussed in previous research.

The focus is not on measuring the scale of digital participation but on understanding how agency is enacted through everyday practices such as messaging, content creation, and online networking. By attending to routine interactions, the paper seeks to capture the subtle ways in which women negotiate empowerment and constraint within digital spaces. This approach allows for an analysis that remains attentive to diversity across region, class, language, and access while avoiding generalised claims about women's experiences online.

WhatsApp and Semi-Private Forms of Agency

WhatsApp occupies a distinctive position within India's digital ecosystem due to its integration into everyday communication across social groups. Unlike open social networking platforms, WhatsApp operates primarily through private chats and closed groups linked to phone numbers, embedding users within existing social relationships. For many women, this semi-private structure provides a relatively accessible and familiar environment for digital participation.

Women-only WhatsApp groups have become important sites of collective engagement, particularly among Self-Help Groups, neighbourhood associations, and informal professional networks. These groups facilitate the circulation of information related to savings, health, childcare, employment, and government welfare schemes. Through routine acts such as forwarding messages, sharing voice notes, and coordinating meetings, women participate in forms of digital collaboration that strengthen social ties and practical knowledge.

Such practices illustrate that digital agency does not always depend on public visibility. Instead, it often operates through collective support and pragmatic engagement. The ability to access information, coordinate action, and maintain social networks can have tangible effects on women's economic and social lives, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts. These forms of participation align with feminist understandings of agency as relational and context-dependent rather than purely individualistic.

At the same time, WhatsApp's embeddedness within familial and community networks can also reinforce surveillance and control. Shared devices, monitored usage, and expectations of constant responsiveness can limit women's autonomy. Participation is therefore shaped by negotiation, with women adopting strategies such as selective engagement, timing their online activity, or using coded language. Agency, in this context, is exercised not through withdrawal but through adaptation to constrained circumstances.

Instagram and the Politics of Visibility

Instagram represents a contrasting digital environment characterised by public visibility, visual storytelling, and algorithmically driven engagement. For Indian women, the platform has become a prominent space for self-representation, creative expression, and economic activity. Through images, reels, and captions, users construct curated narratives that may challenge or subtly rework dominant representations of femininity.

Women-led small businesses have increasingly turned to Instagram as a means of reaching consumers without relying on traditional intermediaries. Home-based enterprises in fashion, food, wellness, and handicrafts use the platform to showcase products, build audiences, and manage sales. These practices

reflect the emergence of digital entrepreneurship as a form of agency that intersects with domestic labour and creative work (Duffy 6).

Instagram has also facilitated forms of digital feminist discourse through hashtag campaigns addressing sexual harassment, body image, and workplace inequality. Such movements enable collective storytelling and visibility, allowing women to articulate experiences that have historically been silenced. However, the benefits of visibility are unevenly distributed. The platform's algorithm privileges content that aligns with dominant aesthetic norms, often marginalising voices that deviate from these expectations.

As a result, agency on Instagram is shaped by careful calibration. Women must balance authenticity with audience expectations, expression with safety, and creativity with algorithmic demands. The labour of maintaining visibility is continuous and emotionally demanding, complicating celebratory narratives of empowerment.

Digital Labour and Affective Economies

Women's participation on social media increasingly involves forms of labour that are affective, creative, and often under-recognised. Content creation, audience engagement, and brand management require sustained emotional and temporal investment. While such labour can generate income and social recognition, it also aligns with neoliberal discourses that frame empowerment in terms of individual productivity and self-optimisation (Gill 250).

The commodification of personal narratives on platforms like Instagram transforms identity into a marketable resource. Women are encouraged to monetise their visibility, often blurring the boundaries between personal life and professional labour. This dynamic raises questions about sustainability, particularly when success depends on constant engagement and algorithmic favour.

At the same time, digital labour can provide forms of autonomy that are otherwise difficult to achieve. The ability to work from home, set flexible schedules, and reach wider audiences can be significant, especially for women navigating domestic responsibilities. These contradictions highlight the need to analyse digital empowerment as a complex process shaped by both opportunity and exploitation.

Surveillance, Harassment, and Negotiated Resistance

Women's digital participation is frequently accompanied by exposure to online harassment, including misogynistic abuse and moral policing. Such practices function as mechanisms of social regulation, discouraging visibility and reinforcing gendered norms. Surveillance operates not only through hostile users but also through data-driven platform infrastructures that track and monetise user behaviour.

Despite these challenges, women continue to develop strategies for navigating hostile digital environments. Practices such as pseudonymity, content moderation, and selective disclosure reflect forms of negotiated resistance that prioritise safety while maintaining participation. These strategies underscore that agency often involves compromise rather than confrontation.

Conclusion

WhatsApp and Instagram have become integral to the ways in which women in India engage with communication, work, and self-representation. These platforms enable new forms of agency by expanding access to information, facilitating economic participation, and creating spaces for collective expression. At the same time, they reproduce existing inequalities through surveillance, algorithmic control, and gendered expectations of visibility and behaviour.

This paper has argued that women's digital agency should be understood as a dynamic and situated practice rather than a guaranteed outcome of technological access. By foregrounding everyday digital negotiations, the analysis moves beyond binary frameworks of empowerment and oppression. Women's engagement with social media reveals both the possibilities and the limits of digital participation, highlighting the need for feminist analyses that remain attentive to context, power, and lived experience.

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