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The Paradox of Digital Technology: Through Feminist Lens

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Abstract

The twenty- first century is the era of digital technology. Most of the youths born in this century are raised and brought up in a digitally rich environment surrounded by smartphones, computers, and social media platforms. From e-commerce apps like Amazon, Flipkart, or Myntra to food delivery services like Zomato and Swiggy or social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, the internet has become an essential part of life for the millennials, making it equally challenging for them to live in the world without using it. Digital technology has transformed people's everyday life by changing the way they communicate, work or participate in their everyday life. It is equally important to understand how digital technology affects women. From the past it has always been a concern that most of the technologies were not women friendly and at the same time, often the creators of technology had an androcentric assumption of its users. It can be attributed to the patriarchal and gendered society that we live in.

This study tries to understand the relationship between digital technology and women in the modern era through a feminist lens using a qualitative methodology. The study is guided by Feminist Standpoint theory and content analysis is the method of data analysis. It is based entirely on secondary data and a comprehensive review of existing literature on the subject matter. The findings reflect that on one hand, digital technology is empowering women to raise their voices, increasing their political awareness and helping them to be economically empowered. But on the other hand, this digital space is also introducing new forms of gender-based violence including cyberstalking, trolling, and online harassment. These are again posing new forms of challenges for women in the already existing patriarchal society. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between digital technology and women is not linear, rather complex, multifaceted, and paradoxical.

Keywords: Digital technology, Internet, Women, Digital paradox, Feminist Standpoint, Patriarchy.

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1.Introduction

The digital era can also be named as the information age, computer age, digital age, or new media age (Castells, 2010). In the twenty-first-century world, most youngsters are born and brought up in an environment that is digital technologically very rich, where their everyday life is surrounded by mobile phones, computers, and different social media sites (Prensky, 2001). In their everyday lives, the dependency on the digital world has been increasing manifolds; Amazon or Flipkart for shopping, YouTube or Over-the-top (OTT) for entertainment, Zomato or Swiggy for food delivery, or Facebook or WhatsApp for connecting with people (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Without using these digital platforms, digital apps, or digital media, it is becoming almost difficult for the millennial generation to maneuver in this modern world (Tapscott, 2009).

Studies reflect that historically technology often was not women-friendly (Perez,2019; Wajcman,2004).The technocrats who developed or designed them emerged from male-dominated androcentric perspectives with the assumption that the users would be only men. These systematically excluded women's needs (Wajman,2010). Studies reveal that early industrial technologies from factory machines to agricultural tools were designed placing men's needs as the priority subsequently leading to lower usability for women (Bardzell,2010; Perez,2019; Wajcman,2010; West, Kraut & Ei Chew, 2019) as well as usage. Research studies reveal that in the past medical technologies, such as diagnostic tools and clinical trials, were designed based on male physiology, producing devices and treatments which were less effective or even sometimes harmful for women's body and mind (Perez,2019.). Recent scholars like Wajcman (2004) and Schiebinger (2023) reaffirm that such long-standing gendered biases are not actually accidental but stems from patriarchal structures that shaped technological priorities, research agendas, and resource allocation exclusively including men and subtly excluding women. As such, the history of development of technology reveals a consistent pattern that was built around male norms, rendering it structurally unfriendly to women.

In the present context, digital technology is becoming unavoidable and it is increasingly shaping every aspect of people's life, be it social, economic, and cultural (Wajcman, 2010; Wajcman, Young, & Fitzmaurice,2020). With the availability of digital tools, women's everyday experiences ranging from communication, mobility, education, employment and to participation in public discourse are deeply digital technology driven (Mackey & Petrucka, 2021). In such a scenario, it is not only crucial but also pertinent to understand the relationship between digital technology and women. Understanding this relationship requires acknowledging that technology is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by the social structures, power relations, and gender norms within which it is produced and used (Faulkner, 2001; Wajcman, 2007).

By adopting feminist standpoint theory, this study seeks to understand both the empowering potentials and the gendered vulnerabilities created by digital technology for women (Mackey

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& Petrucka, 2021;Wajcman, Young, & Fitzmaurice,2020). It aims to explore how digital spaces can simultaneously serve as platforms for voice, visibility, and opportunity, while also being sites of surveillance, harassment, and exclusion (Im et al., 2022). Through this framework, the study analyses the complex and often paradoxical ways in which digital technology affects women's lives in contemporary society.

2.Rationale of the Study

The rapid spread of digital technology has transformed nearly every dimension of social, economic, and cultural life of the people (Wajcman, 2010). However, historical evidence and recent research show that technology has often been structured in such a way that are not women friendly (Aarti & Chauhan, 2025; Faulkner, 2001; Girrbach et al., 2025; Ranjan, Gupta, & Singh, 2024; Smith, 2025; Wajcman, 2007). In many parts of the world and especially in the Global South, report shows that women continue to experience a pronounced "gender digital divide," reflecting disparities not only in access to devices and the internet, but also in digital literacy, agency, and participation in digital spaces (Peláez-Sánchez & Glasserman-Morales, 2023). As digital technologies have become essential for education, employment, communication, health information and civic engagement,therefore such forms of digital exclusion of women may further reinforce the already existing gender inequalities (Wajcman, Young, & Fitzmaurice,2020). This study argues that a feminist and gender-sensitive analysis, can reveal as to how the digital revolution may again reinforce structural inequalities. By analysing the relationship between women and digital technology, the research aims to uncover not only challenges but also the potential for empowerment thus contributing to more inclusive and equitable digital transformation (Mackey & Petrucka, 2021). Therefore, it is important to systematically examine how these technologies interact with women's everyday lives.

3. Research Objectives and Research question

3.1 Objective/s:The objectives taken for the study are the following:

1. To critically examine the role of digital technology in empowering women
2. To study the role of digital technology in oppressing women, highlighting the contradictions that constitute the digital paradox.

3.2 Research Question: The research question taken for this study is as follows:

1. How does digital technology simultaneously empower and marginalize women, creating a digital paradox in their lives?

4.Methodological Framework

4.1 Theory used

The study adopted a Feminist Standpoint Theory as the guiding framework. This theoretical lens helps to centre women's lived experiences, particularly their unique positions, challenges, and forms of agency within digital spaces as demonstrated by previous scholars to analyse a wide range of issues, including women and technology (Velasco, 2025), power relations in

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science communication (Halpern, 2019), digital labour[5] and platform-based work (Tandon & Rathi, 2019), and broader feminist epistemological frameworks (Gurung, 2020).By foregrounding women's standpoints, the study seeks to uncover how digital technologies both empower women and reproduce existing gender inequalities, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the digital paradox.

4.2 Methods and data analysis

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, literature review-based research design to examine both the positive and negative impact of digital technology on women. The study is exclusively based on secondary data such as academic literature, policy reports, and empirical findings rather than collecting primary data or generating new empirical data. The study systematically reviews and analyzes existing scholarly works and secondary literature that are relevant to women and digital technology. Content analysis in this study involves systematically selecting and reviewing relevant secondary literature, coding recurring ideas, grouping similar codes into meaningful categories, and interpreting these patterns. The themes are framed by synthesizing these categories into broader conceptual clusters that clearly reflect the study's focus on both the positive and negative impacts of digital technology on women.

5.Findings

The findings of this research reveals that digital technology has created a deeply ambivalent landscape for women, which offers significant opportunities for empowerment but at the same time it is generating new and intensified forms of challenges for women (Duman,2023; Felgueira et al., 2024). Women's experiences in digital spaces reveal both gains and threats, shaped by patriarchal, socio-economic, and algorithmic forces (Fontanella et al., 2024; Yaman & Cakiroglu,2025). This duality forms the core of the digital paradox that characterizes women's engagement with technology in the digital era.

5.1:Digital technology: A Tool of Empowering

5.1.1 Access to Knowledge and Information

A central positive finding revealed in the study is that digital technology has expanded women's access to knowledge and information (Mackey & Petrucka,2021). In many regions having limited physical infrastructure, digital technologies provide women with health information, educational resources, and legal awareness that were previously inaccessible for them. Recent studies show that mobile internet access directly correlates with greater health literacy, increased awareness of rights, and improved socio-economic participation among women (Rahman et al., 2023). Such informational empowerment reduces women's dependency on traditional tools and helps them to enhance their ability to make informed decisions (Espíndola & Grisolia,2024; Mackey & Petrucka,2021; Waldman et al., 2018).

5.1.2 Online Activism and Feminist Mobilization

Digital communication platforms[1] also create spaces for women for solidarity and collective mobilization. Social media activism has played a vital role in amplifying women's voices, supporting survivors of gender-based violence, and exposing institutional failures. Movements

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such as #MeToo, #BeenRapedNeverReported, and other region-specific digital campaigns have shown how online platforms enable women from any part of the world to break silence and challenge patriarchal norms and fight for their rights (Mendes et al., 2019). The #Me too movement started in 2006 by Tarana Burke against sexual harassment and sexual abuse gained massive internet attention after a tweet by Americal actrtess Alyssa Milano (Brittain,2025). The findings of the research indicate that digital feminist movements empower women by transforming personal experiences of violence into political claims for justice.

5.1.3 Enhancement of Women's Economic Empowerment

Another key positive impact of digital technology relates women to economic empowerment. Digital technologies enable women to participate in e-commerce, online entrepreneurship, gig work[2] and remote employment (Rahul and Shaifali, 2025; Sowmya & Pai,2025). Research shows that digital platforms increase women's earning opportunities, especially for those restricted by household responsibilities, mobility constraints, or local labour market discrimination (OECD, 2022). Women-led businesses on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook or Amazon have grown sharply in the post-pandemic period, contributing to increased financial independence for women (Sowmya & Pai, 2025). Digital financial services including UPI, mobile banking, and fintech apps have further strengthened women's autonomy over income and savings (Albu, 2023).

5.1.4 Digital Spaces for Women's Self Expression

Digital technology has also created a powerful platform for self-expression and identity formation for women. Women increasingly use platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to express themselves, articulate their identities, challenge cultural stereotypes, and reshape public narratives about gender (Aran-Ramspott et al.,2024; Huber,2023). For many young women, the digital sphere becomes a site of creativity and self-representation, offering visibility beyond traditional media controlled by patriarchal institutions. Recent studies highlight how women and girls use social media to cultivate identity, negotiate gendered norms, and build communities of support and empowerment (Dobson, 2015; Wickens & Haughton, 2023; Yin & Zhang, 2024). These platforms democratize voice by enabling women to construct and circulate their own narratives independently.

5.1.5 Accessing Political Knowledge in the Digital Age

Digital technology also helps in increasing women's political awareness. Digital technologies promote women's participation in political processes (Raj,2023). Databases, news applications, online petitions, and digital civic platforms enable women to access political information, engage in debates, and hold institutions accountable. The rise of digital citizenship strengthens democratic participation, especially among young women who see online spaces as less intimidating than offline political settings (Bajwa, Warraich & Iqbal, 2025; Wijaya & Amalia, 2024; Yin & Zhang, 2024).

5.2 Digital technology as Obstructive Force

5.2.1 Online Gender-Based Violence Against Women

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Despite the empowering opportunities, the findings reveal that digital technology simultaneously intensifies gender-based vulnerabilities. One of the most significant negative impacts of digital technology is that it is the high prevalence of online gender-based violence. Women face trolling, sexual harassment, cyberstalking, doxxing[3], deepfake pornography, and non-consensual image sharing at disproportionately high rates in digital platforms (Gulati, 2025). According to UN Women (2022), between 16% and 58% of women globally who use the internet have experienced online or technology-facilitated violence. Australian Institute of Criminology research documents the rise of image-based sexual abuse, including emerging forms such as deepfake sexual imagery, with women constituting the majority of victims (Sullivan & McAlister, 2025). These forms of cyber-violence limit women's public participation and cause fear, trauma, and self-censorship (Puglielli & Craanen,2025).

Studies show that women in India from marginalized communities face online gender-based harassment more, such as hate speech, non-consensual image-sharing, threats, and trolling on social media (Sehgal & Nambiar,2024). According to #ShePersisted (2023), women from marginalized communities including Dalit and Muslim women face targeted online abuse and gendered disinformation more in digital platforms (Di Meco,2023).

5.2.2 Rising Digital Surveillance of Women

Another major negative finding is the increasing surveillance of women in the digital era. Surveillance happens at two levels: institutional surveillance by governments, corporations, and platforms collecting personal data, and patriarchal surveillance by family members, partners, or communities monitoring women's phones, messages, and online behavior (Imam, Manimekalai, & Suba, 2025). Studies show that digital surveillance has become a tool of control in intimate relationships and domestic settings, reinforcing patriarchal authority on women rather than empowering them (MacDonald,et al., 2023). Such monitoring restricts women's autonomy and undermines their digital freedom.

5.2.3 Algorithmic Bias and Gender Inequality

Algorithmic bias also emerges as a significant threat for women in various digital platforms. Machine-learning systems and AI tools often reflect gender stereotypes because they are trained on biased data and developed in male-dominated tech spaces. Recent research reveals that recruitment algorithms, search engines, image-generation tools, and content recommendation systems frequently reproduce harmful gender norms and underrepresent women (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Perez, 2019). Voice assistants such as early versions of Siri and Alexa[4] were programmed to respond submissively to sexist commands, reflecting patriarchal expectations (West, Kraut & Ei Chew, 2019). These biases distort opportunities, reinforce inequality, and perpetuate gendered invisibility in digital environments (Chen, Zhai, & Sun, 2024)

5.2.4 Inequalities in Access, Skills, and Device Ownership

The gender digital divide remains a persistent challenge from the past till present. Women continue to lag behind men in usage, access, skills, and device ownership. According to the

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GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2023), women in low- and middle-income countries are 19% less likely than men to access mobile internet (Jeffrie,2025). The findings of the research show that socio-economic inequality, patriarchal restrictions, and safety concerns particularly affect rural and low-income women more than urban and educated women. Even when women do have access to devices, they often rely on shared or low-quality phones, limiting the depth of their digital participation (Jeffrie,2025).

5.2.5 Emotional and Cognitive Burdens of Digital Technology

Digital technology also intensifies the emotional and cognitive burden on women. The expectation that women must continuously maintain social media presence, manage online relationships, and navigate digital threats contributes to psychological stress, anxiety, and burnout for many women (Vetagiri et al., 2024). In addition, the rise of online activity during the pandemic coincided with increased vulnerability to online violence, a factor that, for some women, added to the burden of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities (ICRW & Quilt.AI, 2021).

5.2.6 Sexual Objectification of Women in Digital Spaces

Another negative impact of digital technology revealed in the findings is the widespread sexual objectification of women online. Social media cultures often reward hyper-sexualized and idealized representations of femininity, pressuring women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards (Fardouly et al., 2015). This leads to body image issues, self-esteem problems, and commodification of female bodies.Platform's algorithms amplify content that fits mainstream beauty norms, reducing diverse representation and erasing marginalized identities (Fardouly et al., 2015; Ozimek et al., 2023; Papageorgiou et al.,2022)

6. Discussions

The digital paradox which indicates that digital technologies simultaneously empower and oppress women can be critically understood through the Feminist Standpoint Theory. Feminist Standpoint Theory says that knowledge emerges from the lived experiences of marginalized groups including women (Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 2017). Therefore, women's experiences of online harassment, algorithmic bias or digital surveillance form a crucial standpoint for analyzing the digital spaces and its impact on women. As Dorothy Smith (1987) argues, marginalized standpoints expose structural inequalities that dominant perspectives overlook; hence, women's digital experiences illuminate the contradictions that produce the digital paradox. Interactions with technology, though often assumed to be gender-neutral, reveal a very different reality for women. From a women's standpoint it can be seen that while technology offers women platforms for expression, education, and activism, it simultaneously exposes them to surveillance, harassment, and objectification and exclusion, revealing gendered power relations embedded in technology design (Wajcman, 2007). These dual realities highlight that digital spaces reinforce offline inequalities in online spaces as well. Feminist Standpoint Theory thus provides the theoretical lens to understand why and how digital technologies act as both sites of empowerment and arenas of patriarchal control for women in the modern era.

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Feminist Standpoint Theory, developed by scholars such as Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987), and Sandra Harding (1991) argues that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized groups such as women have an epistemic advantage in understanding power structures. Harding (1991) emphasizes that women's lived experiences, especially those shaped by oppression, generate a standpoint from which it could critique dominant ideologies. Similarly, Smith (1987) says that women's everyday realities reveal forms of power that remain invisible within mainstream knowledge systems. Hartsock (1983) further argues that patriarchy structures social life, and therefore women's standpoint exposes contradictions within these structures. When applied to understand the relationship between digital technology and women, Standpoint theory helps to understand how women's digital experiences are shaped not simply by individual behavior but by systemic gendered power relations that is prevalent in patriarchal society.

Women face disproportionate levels of online violence including cyberstalking, doxxing, sexual harassment, and threats which shape how they participate in digital spaces. Studies show that women are significantly more likely to experience trolling and sexist attacks compared to men (Jane, 2020). What appears as "open and equal" digital space from a dominant perspective is revealed by women's standpoint to be structured by gendered norms that oppress women's voices in the online space. This aligns with Harding's (2004) argument that marginalized standpoints reveal the "pervasive systems of domination" that shape society.

Feminist scholars argue that technologies are socially shaped and reflect the values of their creators who assume that the user will be only men (Wajcman, 2007). Since the technology industry remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, therefore gendered assumptions reflected in digital design as well. Research has documented gender biases in artificial intelligence, content moderation algorithms, and search engine results (Perez, 2019). For example the early versions of popular voice assistants Siri and Alexa reflected patriarchal expectations by responding submissively to sexiest commands (West, Kraut & Ei Chew, 2019). Women's lived experiences and standpoint reveals that these design flows and the consequences of such biases, reinforcing Hartsock's (1983) argument that dominant knowledge systems overlook the interests of marginalized groups.

While digital economies offer women flexible work opportunities such as content creation, online education, gig work, and platform-based entrepreneurship they also produce unique forms of exploitation (Giustini, 2022; ILO, 2022). Women perform significant emotional and aesthetic labour online, often navigating harassment, sexualized expectations, and reputational risks (Güneş,2025). Feminist Standpoint theory interprets these experiences as structural rather than individual, emphasizing that gendered labour norms are embedded in digital capitalism. This reveals the digital paradox: women appear empowered through participation in digital labour markets, yet face new forms of surveillance, precarity, and objectification.

In the study Feminist Standpoint theory is equally valuable in understanding women's resistance and agency in digital spaces. Digital platforms have enabled large-scale feminist

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mobilizations such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen[6], and numerous regional anti-violence campaigns. These movements highlight how women use digital tools to produce alternative knowledge, challenge dominant narratives, and demand accountability (Mendes et al., 2019). From an Feminist Standpoint Theory perspective, such activism exemplifies "standpoint epistemology in action" which means women transforming their lived experiences into collective political knowledge. Smith (1987) argues that these forms of knowledge-making disrupt patriarchal epistemologies by foregrounding everyday experiences that institutions typically ignore.

Another important finding of the study involves analyzing women's negotiation of online identities. Women must constantly manage the balance between visibility (which brings empowerment) and vulnerability (which brings risk). Many women adopt pseudonyms, limit visibility, or engage in careful self-censorship. These strategies reflect what Collins (2000) calls the "outsider-within" perspective, where marginalized individuals must understand both dominant and marginalized standpoints to survive. Feminist Standpoint Theory interprets this as evidence that digital participation is never equal. Women carry the burden of additional emotional, psychological, and safety-related labour.

Intersectionality[7] further strengthens the application of Feminist Standpoint Theory to the digital paradox. Women's experiences of the digital world differ significantly depending on caste, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and geography. Dalit women activists, for instance, face intersecting casteist and misogynistic abuse online, while Muslim women are targeted through communal hate campaigns (Di Meco,2023) . Harding (2004) and Collins (2000) both argue that standpoint must incorporate intersectional perspectives to fully understand oppression. Applying intersectional Feminist Standpoint Theory shows that the digital paradox is intensified for women who occupy multiple marginalized positions.

In conclusion, an analysis grounded women's experiences and their interaction with digital technology offers a powerful way to understand the digital paradox as it exposes structural power relations embedded in technology, and highlights women's agency in resisting digital patriarchy. By using Feminist Standpoint Theory it could be said that digital empowerment of women cannot be understood apart from the inequalities that shape access, design, participation, and labour of women in the digital space.

7.Conclusion

The existing literature on women and digital technology shows that digital technology creates both opportunities and challenges for women, resulting in a clear digital paradox. On the positive side, digital tools provide women with greater access to information, education, income-generation, and public participation. They help women express their voices, build networks, and engage in activism. However, the same technologies also reproduce gender inequalities through online harassment, cyberviolence, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and unequal access to digital resources. Women from marginalized backgrounds face the highest levels of exclusion. Overall, the findings confirm that digital technology is not always

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inherently gender-neutral; rather, at times it is shaped by existing social structures that both empower and oppress women.

Implications

- Stronger gender-sensitive digital policies are required to tackle online violence, AI bias, and the gender digital divide.
- Technological companies must adopt inclusive, gender-aware design and involve more women in technological development.
- Awareness, literacy, and cultural change are necessary to ensure women's safe digital participation.
- More empirical studies are needed, especially focused on rural, marginalized, and region-specific contexts.

Recommendations

1. Faster legal responses, better reporting tools, and gender-sensitive cybercrime units.
2. Improve women's access to devices, internet, and digital literacy training.
3. Increase women's participation in STEM, tech jobs, and digital entrepreneurship.
4. Use gender-inclusive data, conduct gender audits in AI systems, and promote feminist technological principles.
5. Carry out awareness campaigns, support systems for victims, and promotion of positive digital behaviour.
6. Align national policies with global recommendations from UN Women, GSMA, and UNESCO to ensure digital equality.

End Notes:

1- A digital communication platform is an online system that enables users to create,share or exchange information through the digital network. Some examples of digital communication platforms are Facebook,Instagram,Whatsapp,Google Meet etc. These platforms or digital tools enable fast and interactive communication across distances.

2- Gig works refers to short term,flexible,and task based employment where workers are paid per work or 'gig'. These types of works are often available on digital platforms such as Uber,Swiggy,Rapido etc (Kalleberg,2011).

3- Revealing someone's personal or private information publicly without their consent.

4- Siri and Alexa are examples of Virtual voice assistants that perform tasks,answer questions and interact with users (Hoy, 2018).

5- Digital labour refers to work that is performed through digital platforms,online networks,or automated systems.For example content creation,data entry,online freelancing etc (Scholz,2013)

6- #YesAllWomen: The #YesAllWomen hashtag emerged in 2014 on Twitter to highlight the pervasive nature of misogyny, harassment, and violence against women in everyday life (Kaufman et al.,2025).

7- Intersectionality is a framework that analyzes how different factors like race,class,gender sexuality intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It also argues that

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social inequalities cannot be fully understood with a single category of identity (Crenshaw, 2013).

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