

Women overcoming Marginalisation with the Use of Social Media: An Exploratory Approach

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Abstract

Women in India face discrimination on many fronts, including pay, political representation, education, and employment opportunities, which has led to their marginalisation. India ranks 129th out of 146 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024. This highlights the pressing need to address gender disparities in the country. Amidst these challenges, content creation for social media platforms has offered new opportunities for women, and they are utilising its potential to overcome marginalisation. Previous studies have focused primarily on the use of social media among marginalised youths. This study explores the use of Instagram by women influencers from Rajasthan and assesses its impact on the audience. This study uses an exploratory approach and qualitative content analysis to analyse social media posts, including photos and videos. The study assesses impact through likes, shares, and views on the posts. The thematic content analysis indicated that social media content reaches a large audience and influences social and economic developments in the lives of both its creator and audience. The growth of social media platforms has the potential to change the lives of Indian women by giving them a forum to express themselves, earn a livelihood, acquire relevant information, and attain empowerment.

Keywords: Content creators; Indian; Marginalisation; Social media; Women.

Introduction

Women constitute a marginalised section of Indian society. They have faced marginalisation and social, economic, and political inequalities for decades. This inequality is reflected in India's position in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024, which ranks 129th out of 146 nations. India is among the economies with the lowest levels of economic parity at 39.8%. India

is ranked 142nd in terms of economic participation and opportunity. The country is ranked 112th in terms of education attainment, whereas it is ranked 142nd in health and survival. Moreover, with respect to political empowerment, India has secured 65th rank (World Economic Forum). This shows the gender gap present in Indian society. There is a need to take corrective measures to address economic, educational and health disparities.

This disparity is also reflected in the employment gap in the country. According to the India Discrimination Report 2022, 98% of the employment gap between employed men and women in urban areas is due to gender discrimination (Oxfam India). This figure highlights the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in Indian society. Women try to overcome this marginalisation in various ways, and social media is one of them. However, there is a digital divide in the country. As per the Oxfam India Inequality Report 2022, 61% of men had a mobile phone by the end of 2021, whereas in females, this number was only 31%. This inequality in digital media access limits women's access to opportunities. A study of rural women in Bangladesh revealed that their living standards improved through easy access to emergency medical services via mobile phones, improved educational opportunities and safety for girls, better access to income opportunities and better economic prospects (Islam and Slack). This finding indicates that mobile phones can improve women's lives by providing them with health, education, security, and economic support. Such assistance can help women empower themselves.

With increasing digital penetration in the country, the number of social media users is also increasing. In the third quarter (Q3) of 2023, India had approximately 462 million active social media users (Basuroy). Moreover, the country had the most Instagram users in January 2024, with 362.9 million (Dixon). This statistic represents the potential and role that Instagram can and is currently playing in bringing about positive societal changes, particularly women's empowerment. With the support of social media platforms, many female social media influencers are achieving financial independence, making public appearances, and voicing their opinions. For many women, social media has become an instrument of self-empowerment.

Literature review

Researchers have examined the role of digital media in improving the lives of marginalised populations, including women. The introduction of

social media in emerging economies could strengthen women entrepreneurs' social capital and self-efficacy and lead to empowerment (Beninger et al.). This study highlights the role of social media in women's lives and considers its potential to improve their lives in many ways, including economically. While technology provides a platform for diverse views, marginalised people, especially women, have been hampered in expressing themselves due to unequal access and gender-based violence (Subramanian). This limited access becomes a hurdle for marginalised groups who can benefit from digital media technology to improve their lives.

Research also indicates that social media can benefit other marginalised groups. People with disabilities, a marginalised group, have been found to have positive experiences with social media in terms of friendship, enjoyment, social identity, and self-esteem (Caton and Chapman). The findings suggest that social media platforms can improve the lives of marginalised groups in society. Research indicates that the more actively people engage in social media, the more empowered they feel, implying that utilising social media has become a sign of empowerment (Li).

Women use social media for various reasons. Women bloggers are found using social media for information, engagement and recreation (Chen). Social media platforms help women overcome marginalisation and present their ideas to a large audience. With the help of their Instagram postings, women can actively participate in virtual communities and even question the societal limits they encounter (Riquelme et al.).

Researchers have identified several benefits associated with the use of social media platforms, particularly for women. It was discovered that Instagram can help develop a sense of self-efficacy, especially in a cultural environment where women are restricted. Furthermore, a connection was also found between Instagram use and women's psychological empowerment (Riquelme et al.). A study demonstrates that the visual aspects of social media allow women to convey their identity and desired public image (Hurley). Social media helped women entrepreneurs in the southern Philippines seize opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, social media acts as an enabler of women's empowerment (Lavilles et al.).

The increased use of social media technologies by women in the workplace could signify empowerment. Women also benefit from the use of these digital technologies to almost the same extent as men do. However, education has been identified as a crucial element for success in this domain. Social media offers women a new avenue of support and opportu-

nities, particularly those lacking in a conservative society (Madra-Sawicka et al.). Research highlights that social media use positively predicts support for women in community leadership in Qatar. Moreover, social media provides an alternative channel for women to discuss their issues without leaving their homes (Shockley et al.).

Social media provides a platform for discussions on sensitive topics. A study find that the social media platform Twitter can not only foster conversations about sensitive themes but also give a voice to women in India who experience marginalisation in gender norms and gender-based violence (Gurman et al.). These studies highlight the role that social media can play in empowering women.

Objectives of the study

- To analyse the content shared by women content creators on Instagram
- To assess the impact of such content on audience engagement

Method

This research adopts an exploratory approach and employs qualitative content analysis for analysing the type of content that women social media influencers typically post on Instagram and also how this content contributes to the empowerment of women. The study focuses on women content creators from Rajasthan, which has a low percentage of female literates and high numbers of unemployed women. As per the report of the National Statistical Office (NSO) November 2019, Rajasthan has a female literacy rate of 57.6%, the second lowest among all the states. However, it is to be noted that according to the Centre for Monitoring India Economy (CMIE) report February-August 2021, the women's unemployment rate in Rajasthan is 65.31%, making it third highest in the country. These socio-economic challenges make Rajasthan an interesting backdrop for a study related to women's empowerment and social media.

For fulfilling the research objectives, four eminent Instagram content creators from Rajasthan were purposively selected for the study based on their social media reach and diversity of content. The content creators are:

Table 1: Selected Social media influencers data

Name	Profession	Instagram ID	Instagram Followers	Key Focus (on Instagram)
Pooja Bishnoi	Athlete	poojabishnoi36	1.2 million	Promoting fitness and sports
Ruma Devi	Public Figure	drrumadevi	316,000	Social service and preserving traditional crafts
Vagmita Singh	Digital Creator	thatindi-anchick_	566,000	Creating relatable content
Naini Jain	Radio Jockey & Digital Creator	rj_naini07	247,000	Blending humour with insights

The study took the first ten Instagram posts from each content creator, focusing on posts which were published till April 2023. Only one post per date has been included to avoid redundancy in data, and irrelevant posts are excluded according to the objectives of the research. Thus, 40 Instagram posts were put through qualitative content analysis.

The identification of themes related to visuals, captions, and hashtags was analysed inductively. This further analysis of the posts was evaluated for the second objective of the study, which is measuring the effect of content on the audience using engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) for the selected posts.

Thus, this combined thematic analysis and social media engagement metric could give a more nuanced understanding concerning the role of social media content towards women's empowerment in Rajasthan.

Findings

The findings of this study are organised by content creators. Each Instagram post is analysed and categorised by date, type (reel or photo), description, theme (derived inductively), and user engagement (based on

likes, shares and comments). This approach provides a comprehensive overview of Instagram posts.

Pooja Bishnoi

She is a 13-year-old athlete with 1.2 million followers on her Instagram account. Her parents manage the Instagram account. Among the ten posts selected for this research study, nine are reels, and one is a photo post. A detailed description of her Instagram posts is given in the table.

Table 2: Pooja Bishnoi's Instagram posts description

Date	Type of post	Description	Theme	User Engagement
14 April, 2023	Reel	Pooja Bishnoi is getting support from Virat Kohli Foundation-Sevva	Encouraging women	Likes- 354K, Comments-1,090, Share- 19.4K
26 March, 2023	Reel	Pooja Bishnoi meeting with cricketer Virat Kohli	Achieving heights in life	Likes- 765K, Comments-1,218, Share-5,519
24 March, 2023	Photo	Pooja Bishnoi meeting with cricketer Virat Kohli, actor Anushka Sharma and athlete Neeraj Chopra	Achieving heights in life	Likes- 1M, Comments-1,070
10 March, 2023	Reel	Sharing a motivational message	Motivating others	Likes- 110k, Comments-961, Share-2,545

2 March, 2023	Reel	Sharing a motivational message	Motivating others	Likes- 120K, Comments-1,048, Share-472
22 February, 2023	Reel	Sharing a motivational message	Motivating others	Likes- 447K, Comments-3,649, Share-18.3K
13 February, 2023	Reel	Sharing a motivational message	Motivating others	Likes- 141k, Comments-417, Share-1,552
3 September, 2021	Reel	An advertisement with cricketer MS Dhoni breaking gender stereotypes in sports	Bringing change in society	Likes- 502k, Comments-2,151, Share- 15.1K
10 August, 2021	Reel	Pooja Bishnoi meeting with cricketer MS Dhoni	Achieving heights in life	Likes- 3.4 M, Comments-4,459, Share-131K
22 February, 2021	Reel	Motivating Pooja Bishnoi to win a gold medal in the Olympics	Encouraging women	Likes- 453K, Comments-1,172, Share-Not given

The table illustrates how Pooja Bishnoi, a 12-year-old athlete, receives encouragement and motivation from prominent personalities and the general public, as reflected in high-engagement metrics such as comments and shares on her Instagram posts. 'Achieving heights' and 'motivating others' are frequent themes that emerged from the qualitative content analysis of her Instagram posts. One post by Pooja Bishnoi (an advertisement) challenges gender stereotypes in sports, addressing the mentality that tennis is considered a game for girls, not a cricket. In this advertisement, she as-

serts, “Let my stamina decide my game, not my gender.” Her posts have a high impact on the audience. The level of engagement in these posts is high, frequently reaching millions.

Ruma Devi

Ruma Devi is a social activist and the president of Gramin Vikas Evam Chetna Sansthan. She aims to create a sustainable livelihood for rural women artisans and their communities. She has 316k followers on her Instagram account. A majority of the selected posts from Ruma Devi’s Instagram page are photo posts; only two posts are reels. A detailed description of her posts is provided in the table.

Table 3: Ruma Devi’s Instagram posts description

Date	Type of post	Description	Theme	User Engagement
29 March, 2023	Photo	Encouragement letter of Rajasthan CM for organising a programme	Encouraging women	Likes- 1,941, Comments- 27
27 March, 2023	Reel	Encouraging folk singers by organising a programme ‘vaneetsav’	Bringing change in society	Likes- 6,885, Comments- 77
26 March, 2023	Photos	Ruma Devi attending an event	Making her presence	Likes- 7,425, Comments- 67
17 March, 2023	Photos	Ruma Devi at an event at Delhi University with Union Minister Smriti Irani	Women achieving heights in life	Likes- 2,394, Comments- 33
16 March, 2023	Photos	Meeting with Union minister	Women achieving heights in life	Likes- 3,009, Comments- 31

15 March, 2023	Reel	Ruma Devi on TV	Women getting encouragement	Likes- 1,814, Comments- 34
13 March, 2023	Photos	Ruma Devi as chief guest at a blood donation camp	Women achieving heights in life	Likes- 6,530, Comments- 77
12 March, 2023	Photos	Ruma Devi as chief guest at a programme of CRPF	Women achieving heights in life	Likes- 2,673, Comments- 27
11 March, 2023	Photos	Ruma Devi as a guest at a programme	Women achieving heights in life	Likes- 3,820, Comments- 37
10 March, 2023	Photos	Getting felicitated at an event	Women getting encouragement	Likes- 3,031, Comments- 28

The table highlights that ‘women achieving heights in life’ is the most common theme emerging from Ruma Devi’s Instagram posts. Her posts show that she is achieving heights by meeting with ministers and coming as a chief guest at events, leading to her empowerment. The second most prevalent theme is ‘getting encouragement’; it emphasises that women will be empowered when supported and motivated by society. The themes of ‘bringing change in society’ and ‘making her presence’ also emerged from Ruma Devi’s social media posts. These posts will also encourage other women to come forward and work for their empowerment.

Vagmita Singh

Vagmita is a digital creator with 566k followers on her Instagram account, which she runs under the handle ‘thatindianchick_’. A detailed description of her posts is given in the table.

Table 4: Vagmita Singh's Instagram posts description

Date	Type of post	Description	Theme	User Engagement
30 March, 2023	Photos	Posing for photo	Making her presence	Likes- 63,764, Comments- 911
28 March, 2023	Reel	Meme on Relationship	Meme	Likes- 40.8K, Comments- 216, Share- 18.6K
25 March, 2023	Reel	Meme on stubborn people	Meme	Likes- 27.5K, Comments- 139, Share- 3,790
23 March, 2023	Reel	Meme on relationship	Meme	Likes- 33.1K, Comments- 304, Share- 18K
14 March, 2023	Reel	Raising the issue of mood swings during periods through meme	Meme	Likes- 869K, Comments- 3,406, Share-745K
11 March, 2023	Reel	Meme on relationship	Meme	Likes- 27.7K, Comments- 118, Share- 5,930
9 March, 2023	Reel	Paid partnership with Google India	Meme	Likes-36.3K, Comments-257, Share-13.4K
4 March, 2023	Photos	Travelling in Sri Lanka, Jordan and Petra	Travelling	Likes- 54,677, Comments-216
18 January, 2023	Reel	Meme on dog names in Delhi on brand names	Meme	Likes- 241K, Comments- 3,095, Share- 171K
21 October, 2022	Reel	Making fun of the French language	Meme	Likes- 435K, Comments- 2,288, Share- 427K

The majority of Vaghmita Singh's posts are memes. In addition to providing entertainment, her memes also address serious topics such as mood swings during periods. Most of the content on her Instagram page consists of reels. Two posts highlight her travelling in different countries, reflecting her freedom and individuality. One post also showcases her confidence through photographs. Vaghmita did a meme in a paid partnership with Google India, demonstrating her financial independence. Her posts have good audience engagement and reach, as evident by the number of likes and shares.

Naini Jain

Naini Jain is a radio jockey, digital creator, and motivational speaker. She has 247k followers on her Instagram account. She operates under the handle 'rj_naini07'. All the posts on Naini Jain's Instagram account are reel-based. A detailed description of her posts is given in the table.

Table 5: Naini Jain's Instagram posts description

Date	Type of post	Description	Theme	User Engagement
30 March, 2023	Reel	Roaming in Rajasthan and showing its culture on the occasion of Rajasthan divas	Travelling	Likes- 2,703, Comments- 51, Share- 9
29 March, 2023	Reel	Motivating others for relationship	Motivating others	Likes- 7,773, Comments- 84, Share- 894
27 March, 2023	Reel	Motivating others to say no to a few things	Motivating others	Likes- 6,006, Comments- 64, Share- 458
24 March, 2023	Reel	Let go your past and live in present	Motivating others	Likes- 5,908, Comments- 107, Share- 367
21 March, 2023	Reel	Accepting is very important in life	Motivating others	Likes- 8,132, Comments- 101, Share- 612

18 March, 2023	Reel	Meme on week-end plan	Meme	Likes- 2,261, Comments- 54, Share- 16
16 March, 2023	Reel	Motivating others on complications of life	Motivating others	Likes-8,334, Comments-106, Share- 766
7 November, 2022	Reel	High lighting the issue of nepotism through meme	Meme	Likes- 113K, Comments- 865, Share- 150K
8 October, 2022	Reel	Motivational video on emotional people	Motivating others	Likes- 90.2K, Comments- 861, Share- 46K
10 July, 2022	Reel	Naini Jain travelling in Uttarakhand	Travelling	Likes- 4,160, Comments- 103, Share- 78

Naini Jain's Instagram page predominantly features motivational content. There is a clear dominance of motivational content. This content has a high reach and engagement with the audience. Some memes on her page are for entertainment purposes, and a meme on her page addresses the issue of nepotism. Two of the selected posts are about travel, highlighting women's independence and confidence in their ability to travel solo.

Discussion

The study revealed that the selected social media influencers from Rajasthan use the social media platform Instagram to express their personal autonomy, which is evident in the themes of 'travelling' and 'making her presence'. Their popularity on social media also brings them financial opportunities, such as Vagmita Singh's paid partnership with Google India. This finding demonstrates that Instagram serves as a medium for self-expression and offers financial benefits to influencers. Earlier research also suggests that social media has become a platform for diversifying income sources and expressing personal autonomy for women in the southern Philippines (Lavilles et al.).

Instagram also offers women influencers a platform to showcase their achievements to the world. For example, social media influencers Pooja Bishnoi and Ruma Devi use Instagram posts to highlight their achieve-

ments, reflecting the recurring theme of 'achieving heights in life'. It helps them build their desired identity. The visual scope of social media platforms allows women to show the world who they are and how they want to be seen (Hurley). This aligns with the results of the current study, which suggests that Instagram enables women to construct and project their desired identities to the world. Research suggests that digital media technologies, such as social media, can support women's empowerment (Madra-Sawicka et al.). Similarly, the current study revealed that social media influencers use Instagram posts to motivate other women, highlighting the role of social media as an empowerment tool.

The selected social media influencers have many followers, and they also engage with users in the form of likes, comments and shares. Instagram helps build social connections online. A study reveals that social media enhances women's social capital in Egypt, empowering them to improve their lives (Beninger et al.). The analysis of Instagram influencers' posts revealed that they frequently share memes on their page. These memes not only entertain but also foster audience engagement. Existing research suggest that motivations for social media use are information, engagement, and recreation, particularly among women bloggers (Chen). This finding aligns with the current study, where influencers are likely to use memes for entertainment and to connect with their audience.

Instagram offers influencers a platform to express themselves. They have created online communities where they share life achievements and encourage other women. Instagram facilitates active participation in a virtual community and allows women to express themselves (Riquelme et al.). A similar pattern was observed in this study. Instagram influencers use the platform to shape public opinion about themselves and women. They motivate others, share their achievements, and bring change to society through their posts. A similar pattern was observed in a study conducted in Qatar; it found that social media provides an alternative channel through which to shape public opinion about women. The selected Instagram influencers are active in their social media usage. The more actively engaged social media users are, the more empowered they feel (Li). These findings suggest that the social media platform Instagram is an empowerment tool for selected women influencers.

Conclusion

Today, women are achieving independence and earning their livelihoods through both traditional means and new media technologies, such as

social media. This study revealed that the selected women social media influencers Pooja Bishnoi, Ruma Devi, Vagmita Singh, and Naini Jain utilised Instagram to motivate and engage their audience. The selected influencers are found to share motivational content and memes through their Instagram pages. The analysis of social media posts revealed that motivational content and memes appeared most frequently. Such content has a high reach among the audience and could lead to beneficial changes in the lives of the audience.

The theme 'achieving heights in life' emerged eight times in four Instagram content creators' forty social media posts. They share their accomplishments on their Instagram account, which enhances their fame and inspires other women. The analysis of social media posts revealed that selected women influencers receive support in various ways, and this theme was represented in the Instagram posts five times. The content creators also shared content about their travels, demonstrating their growing independence and capacity for learning and contributing to their empowerment. Additionally, it was discovered that content creators were trying to change society. The final theme that emerged from analysing content providers' social media posts was 'making their presence known'. This is because the creators discovered that sharing their things on the internet enabled them to engage with and gain popularity among their audience. The results of the data analysis indicated that social media content reaches a large audience, as evidenced by likes, comments, and shares on their posts. Their social media posts also bring social, economic, and political developments into the lives of both their creator and audience.

This study revealed that social media influencers are receiving a platform to express themselves, providing them with a means for social and political participation. In addition, they are also gaining financial independence through paid collaboration. The growth of social media platforms has the potential to change the lives of Indian women by giving them a forum to express themselves, earn a livelihood, acquire relevant information, and attain empowerment.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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