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Exploring Determinants of Urban Middle Class Women's Digital Identity: Evidences from Indian Cities

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Internet and digital media have transformed the way in which we live, interact and transact with each other. Digital content has come to inhabit the world we live in, where everything from memories to plans and knowledge to ideas are converted into electronic format that facilitates storage and transfer across distances and geographies, instantly. Though the digitization process is incumbent on the availability of physical infrastructure such as servers, cables and broadband and mobile phones, powered by wireless networks, landline telephones, radio and television broadcast alongside cutting-edge ICT pieces such as artificial intelligence and robotics acts as a prominent enabler¹.

The rapid pace of expansion of digital infrastructure has hastened the process of digitization. In India alone, internet access has registered a stupendous rise, from 4% in 2007 to around 45% in 2021 thus signifying that nearly

half of the approximately 1.37 billion population have access to the internet for personal and professional reasons. This arguably makes India only second in the world in terms of active internet users². Global statistics, however betray considerable discrimination in women's access to internet and mobile with about 85% of women having access to the internet, 83% of women owning a mobile phone and 58% using mobile internet compared to a nearly 100% usage among men (GSMA, 2021). Notwithstanding the positive impacts of digital revolution such as, quick and easy transmissibility of information, greater access, breaking down of barriers distance, language and socio economic difference to knowledge sharing to a large extent, its gains evidently do not spread horizontally or vertically, barriers being formed across gender and income groups among others. The divide is wider in low- and middle-income countries where reportedly a total of 1.7 billion



women orbit outside this digital web without owning an internet-enabled mobile phone thus considerably losing out access to newer types of jobs as also technology induced empowerment and identity-building opportunities³. In India, the largest beneficiaries of the internet and digital media expansion are from the well-educated, middle to high income, technologically literate urban sections, with 89% of the urban population in India having the benefit of 3G mobile broadband coverage as compared to only 29% digital users in the villages. More importantly, on average, 12% fewer women than men have been found to have unmitigated access to the internet, the gender gap widening due to the present pandemic (Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021)².

One of the particularly engaging aspects, and in many ways the premise of Web 2.0 is its ability to support user-generated content⁴ and mobilities in an interactive and ubiquitous manner. Unlike the first-generation Web applications that relied mainly on individual sources for content creation, Web 2.0 is principally about shared content creation. Thus, social media, blogs, wikis applications and other digital networking sites all fall within its ambit⁴ which represent a perceptible shift in the way the internet began to be used in the 21st century⁴. Within the digital world, this thrust towards shared content creation has led to newer network building and a multilayered web experience for millions of digital users nationally and internationally thereby impacting processes of identity building and self-representation online.

DEFINING IDENTITY & DIGITAL IDENTITY

The term identity implies two things. On one hand, identity is something unique to each of us as it distinguishes us from others. On the other hand, identity refers simply to a social category implying a relationship with a broader collective and is a matter of what we share with other people. In both the contexts identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self and the other. Broadly understood, identity constitutes interests, habits, preferences and beliefs forming the basis of social relations, social group memberships and most importantly define 'who we are'. The processes of identity-making do not constitute an independent strategy. Rationality and choice are in fact fundamental to, and inextricably bound up into it. It has also been argued recently that identity construction is governed by particular motivational principles, like, self-esteem, efficacy, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, and meaning. Herein, identity motives are defined as "pressures toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the processes of identity construction"⁵.

Digital identities are online versions of ourselves. They can be a subtype of a public persona, an extension of our 'true' selves, or they can be completely fabricated and fantastical, to function as a mask to hide the identity of an Internet user from rest of the world⁴. Simply put, it is a

reality or existence that in most cases will only exist on the Internet and not 'offline' in real life. A digital identity can spin intricate, interconnected webs utilising creative, social and interactive platforms that enable them to share and perform to an open or closed audience⁶. As Federman points out, "...the key cultural consideration of the Internet is not so much the digitization of information, but the digitization of us. How women approach the digital media; how they situate themselves within the varying digital environment; the different factors that motivate them to interact with the digital media how these factors distinguish their interaction on it. How do women create their identities on the Web?

This paper attempts to answer these questions based on survey of 540 middle class women respondents in Mumbai and Kolkata and their peri urban areas and Focus group discussion as well as semi structured interviews of women. It draws attention to different nodal points through which perhaps this interface can be understood. They are respectively (a) Age, (b) Socio-economic background of the participants, and (c) Physical Ability and Disability. The determinants of digital identity creation are similar to non-digital of offline identities however, the interplay between these are different giving rise new ways of negotiation with digital world. Further, the process and the purpose of digital identity creation for women does not tread the familiar lines creating new modes of

FIELD VIEW: PROFILING URBAN MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

The paper uses field notes from an Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, sponsored Major Research Project on "Women as 'Digital Subjects'; Participating, Vulnerabilities and Building Empowerment". Government policy data, surveys, approach papers

This paper focuses on women in urban India, hence the social parameters and data presented pertain to the specific demographics. The study was conducted in two urban and peri-urban areas of Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Kolkata and Howrah. The respondents included 540 women who were drawn from various socio-economic backgrounds, educational statuses, ages and religious groups. The work status of the demographics in the sample includes- students 41 per cent, salaried workers (formal and informal/ full-time and part-time) 31 per cent, homemakers 20 per cent and businesswomen or entrepreneurs 8 per cent. 46 per cent of these women reported a total family or household income of two to five lakhs per annum. The survey was conducted from January to May 2021 through a questionnaire, in-depth face to face or telephonic interviews and focus group discussions with targeted groups including home-based entrepreneurs in Kolkata and Mumbai. The survey was conducted with a total sample of 525 respondents- 284 from Mumbai- Navi-Mumbai, 241 from Kolkata- Howrah.



The survey respondents are defined as urban middle class Indians based on the following criteria-

- Education levels
- Language used for social media
- Occupations
- Household income
- Housing type
- Monthly spending on internet plans

The middle-class status of the survey respondents is determined in this research from the socio-economic characteristics of the demographics. Findings of the survey give some insights into the manner in which women use social media to construct new identities.

DETERMINANTS OF IDENTITY MAKING/CONSTRUCTION: THE YOUNG AND NOT SO YOUNG

The birth of a digital identity can start as easily and simply as creating a name, account or handle to register on an Internet website, and can be as elaborate as an online existence that spans over many different websites, including a multi-media trail that can include anything from photographs, text, videos, music and even live webcams. The survey shows that among the most important determinants of digital identity construction is age. Age plays an important role in determining the quantity and quality of time women spent online. Our surveys, fgds and interviews illustrate that women belonging to a younger generation (18-25 years, 26-35 years and 36-45 years) take to the digital media much readily for social, economic or even political expressions of their identity than those in the age bracket between 46-55 years and those around 60 years of age. Though, older women have also acquainted with the digital media—especially social media, either by free will or for needs of exigency. It is however not the unfamiliarity with the medium that inhibits older women, but rather the strong public-private that prevents them from “putting themselves out there.” Further the construction of self in the social media is mediated by societal lens; namely family, relatives, community and the like. As some respondents pointed out, “how can you put everything about yourself on the internet? What will my family members, friend's neighbours, think about me? What if they think I am showing off?” Younger women users on the other hand engage in electronic exhibitionism and strive to attract as much attention as possible. Younger women, across class and location showed greater openness in sharing on the internet, especially the social media. However, younger college going women more carefully curated the image that they wished “put out” carefully choosing the language, the pictures, the products, the emoji's and the views.

Interestingly the process of learning about and of the digital media, across age groups has been almost

similar— interactional and self-taught (Table 1). Most women have acquired the knowledge of the medium either from their peers or from their family members. None of the respondents across age and class were trained to use digital media or underwent formal training in the same. In a FGD, school teachers—both retired and continuing shared how the digital media has become an integral part of their lives especially during Covid times. Respondents shared how their use of the digital has spread beyond the social media after March 2020 due to the pandemic imposed lockdown. This may not appear particularly significant, but seen in the context of gendered nature of technology, and women's laboured relationship with it, and its role in forming women's identities, it holds considerable importance. Despite, their limited knowledge of the application, the interactional nature of the medium and the possibility of self-learning using learning tools led women across age to embed in the medium.

Women now explore more expansive ways of using the digital media as one school teacher in her fifties pointed out that she not only interacts with her two daughters and their respective families who stay in Bangalore, through skype and whatsapp videos; she has also self-admittedly ‘learnt’ to read books online and even visit international museums and art galleries exhibitions online. Similarly, in a long interview, a woman entrepreneur who is in her end-fifties and based in Kolkata shared about successful her business through whatsapp in 2019 and continues to do so.

The fears and vulnerabilities about their digital identities, across age groups also are similar. Like younger women, older women in both the cities feared financial fraud as a major vulnerability. They admitted to be troubled by possibilities of being duped online but refused to be daunted and discouraged by such instances of fraud. Such new modes of knowing and interacting with the digital platforms, arguably, question any blanket generalization about the aged population taking lesser affinity towards these modes of communication than the younger generation.

The greater affinity with digital platforms, however does not necessarily translate into increased digital skill. Thus, almost all the school teachers who participated in the FGD, especially those who are still in the teaching profession, discussed how almost in every class they learnt something new about the digital platforms courtesy their students which in many ways problematised the unilateral relation between the ‘teacher’ and the ‘student’. What was interesting to note that almost all of them conformed to the idea that they lack digital skills since they are from a different generation. A woman entrepreneur who sells sarees through whatsapp also submitted how she was initially ‘mocked’ by her grown up sons for her inability to be properly skilled digitally. Though this did not deter her, it surfaced from almost all the fgds and interviews, that there is a certain ‘reluctance’ among the older generation to instantly take



Table 1: Survey Respondents: A Profile

| Age Distribution: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women) | | | | | |
|--|---|------------------------|----------------|---|--|
| | 18-25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 | >55 |
| Kolkata | 49.20% | 20.40% | 13.80% | 10.40% | 6.30% |
| Mumbai | 38.90% | 24.60% | 16.80% | 14.60% | 5.60% |
| Total | 43.70% | 22.70% | 15.40% | 12.70% | 5.60% |
| Education Level : Kolkata & Mumbai (Women) | | | | | |
| | Below Graduate | | | Graduate & above | |
| Kolkata | 42.50% | | | 57.50% | |
| Mumbai | 22.90% | | | 77.10% | |
| Total | 31.90% | | | 68.10% | |
| Languages Preferred for Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women) | | | | | |
| | English for everything | | | English for Facebook, Indian language for Whatsapp and youtube videos | Indian language like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali for all |
| Kolkata | 76.00% | | | 6.00% | 13.00% |
| Mumbai | 71.00% | | | 15.00% | 13.00% |
| Total | 73.50% | | | 11.00% | 12.80% |
| Occupation: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women) | | | | | |
| | Student | | Homemaker | Businesswomen | Salaried and other |
| Kolkata | 46.70% | | 18.80% | 6.30% | 28.30% |
| Mumbai | 36.40% | | 21.80% | 8.90% | 32.90% |
| Total | 41.20% | | 20.40% | 7.70% | 30.80% |
| Family/Household Income: Kolkata & Mumbai | | | | | |
| | Below 2 lakh | | 2 lakh- 5 lakh | 5 lakh- 7 lakh | Above 7 lakh |
| Kolkata | 36.70% | | 33.80% | 13.80% | 15.80% |
| Mumbai | 27.90% | | 56.80% | 3.20% | 12.10% |
| Total | 31.90% | | 46.20% | 8.10% | 13.80% |
| Type of Family Accommodation: Kolkata & Mumbai | | | | | |
| | Owned/Rented House/Flat two or more rooms | | | Other | |
| Kolkata | 84.20% | | | 15.80% | |
| Mumbai | 78.20% | | | 21.80% | |
| Total | 81.00% | | | 19.00% | |
| Monthly Spending on Internet Plans (Household and/or Individual): Kolkata & Mumbai | | | | | |
| | Less than Rs 200 | Between Rs 200 and 500 | | More than Rs 500, but less than Rs1000 | More than Rs 1000 |
| Kolkata | 26% | 35% | | 28% | 10% |
| Mumbai | 22% | 28% | | 14% | 14% |
| Total | 24% | 42% | | 21% | 12% |



Table 2:

| Q 19 What made you open a social media account like FB, WA, YT, etc? | | |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Mumbai & Kolkata | Frequency | Percent |
| Influence of peers/siblings | 99 | 18.9 |
| Desire to stay connected with friends/relatives | 434 | 82.7 |
| Professional/business reasons | 155 | 29.5 |
| Other | 32 | 6.1 |
| Total Sample | 525 | |

to the digital medium and sites especially while making financial transactions. Thus, younger women in the FGDs pointed out that unlike them, the older members of their families prefer to make purchases not from e commerce sites or but from the local grocers. Similar experiences were cited by a Mumbai based baker and a fashion designer who shared during a FGD how they prefer offline transactions to online ones.

Familiarity or trust plays a major role in such financial transactions for the older generation to a large extent, who choose local sellers and traders over online sellers principally because they can 'see' the persons unlike the people in offline transactions. On the contrary, it is precisely this convenience of not having to deal with real people on a physical plane while making online choices that ticks the right box for the next generation of respondents for this project. This difference, that comes across more profoundly through surveys, reflects how women's choices on use of digital media is determined not due to consideration of age but on account of physical proximity, shared experiences and trust.

The issue of trust comes up regularly in women's narrative about their relation with digital media, but the nature of the narrative varies depending on women's location in age, class continuum. For young students of Mumbai as also Kolkata the issue of trust becomes significant in dealing with personal spaces particularly in relation to romantic relations and choice of partners. Young women respondents prefer anonymity in day to day and mundane encounters, however they are more circumspect in personal and more intimate relationship, where the element of trust creeps in. the acceptance of digital media for social interaction leading to romantic relationships still circumscribed existing social norms and patriarchal structures. In a FGD of young college going girls, one participant, from Mumbai argued that while Facebook and Instagram are good mediums of maintaining social relations, dating apps and romantic relations on the digital medium are best avoided. On being countered that online matrimonial sites do perform similar functions, the respondent countered that matrimonial sites are usually accessed with the knowledge and consent of family. They may also operate by a family member on behalf of women.

Such perspectives critically inform the identity construction of women digital users depending on their age as well

as respective socio-economic backgrounds. The case of an employee in Mumbai is illustrative. The young woman in her mid-20s works as a clerk and accountant. She initially claimed that she met her (now) husband on Facebook and married after befriending him. Gradually however she started to distance herself from her initial submission despite reluctantly accepting that she had first met him on Facebook, refused to acknowledge that it was Facebook friendship that had matured into a relationship and eventually marriage. She justified the FB friendship by saying that he lived in the same locality and when they decided to marry, he was approved by the family. In fact, she went at length to describe how he came over to her home in the presence of her sister and parents, with his parents and they sought her hand in marriage thus contradicting her own submissions in the course of the interview. Such zeal to portray an online affair and eventual marriage into an arranged one, reflects how the socio-economic gender and digital media intersect in shaping perspective on the self. The online identity creation may thus appear to democratic and unencumbered by patriarchal structures, which actually lie embedded in the identity creation process.

DIGITAL INTERACTIONS & SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: SHARPENING THE CLASS DIVIDE

It was evident that the ubiquity of the digital platforms or the offline mode of communications held different import for different socio-economic classes. Such dominance of mode of knowledge dissemination didn't arguably have an empowering role in the lives of all. There seems to be a yawning gap between how respondents from educated middle classes and those from lower middle-class backgrounds residing off the main orbit of these two metro cities, perceive the new opportunities the digital world began to offer especially during the Covid times. This was aptly expressed by a post graduate student from one of the older universities of Kolkata. In the fgd held in March 2021, Maya (name changed for anonymity) had expressed her anguish and grievance at the overwhelming reliance on digital media for education purposes thus giving a counterpoint to the general discourses on the positive correlation between digital access, capacity building and empowerment. She had argued that the online nature of education leads to



increased expenses on data packs, smartphones or laptops, unlike books that can be physically borrowed from libraries. Maya's reasons for preferring the offline medium over digital medium for purposes of higher education might be solely financial but it does raise a very valid question regarding the purported equality created by the online medium. It sharply brings out the divisive force of digital medium, sharpening class and economic divide.

That the users remain conscious about their socio-economic background while using the digital media becomes further evident as there have been instances when students based in Mumbai in the course of a FGD refused to switch on their cameras despite requests, not so much on account of privacy of person but on account of her being acutely aware of the socio-economic status. The notion of seamless uniformity peddled by the digital media becomes further questionable. Such findings therefore underscore the socio-economic aspect of women's identity that becomes relevant and pronounced only during their interaction with the digital media. The class divides finds resonance in the way and purpose for which urban middle class women use internet. Interestingly, survey data reveals that it is the economically better off women who propose faith in the empowering impact of digital media and it use it for purposes of business re-education. In their context, the intersectionality of gender, economic status and education becomes particularly prominent.

OF PHYSICAL ABILITY/DISABILITY

For women users of the digital platforms, it has been observed in the course of the interviews and FGDs that the virtues and limitations or the empowering and dis-empowering characteristics of the virtual world are more immediate and potent than to the users who are not plagued by any physical disability. Dr. T (name changed), who teaches in an undergraduate college. In two long one-to-one interview sessions shared her own experiences with disability. As a woman suffering from *Retinitis Pigmentosa* since childhood coming from the Bohra Muslim community, there is an interplay of various shades of potential tropes of disabilities—of religion, of gender, of physical disability in her identity building per se as also vis-a-vis the digital media. In her experience, digital media has had a miraculously enabling contribution to her higher education. Features like JAWS and NVDA that read out everything written on computer screen came to her rescue and enabled her to be self-reliant in a major way thus foregrounding aspects of her identity that would not have flowered but for her interaction with the digital platforms. These naturally have a tremendously constructive effect on how the visually impaired people perceive themselves as well as their relation with the wider world adding on to their functionality and making them far less dependent on other sighted persons that certainly brings in equality at some plane. What is

significant is that these features are inbuilt in the I-phone and Android technology and the fact that for 'disabled' persons there is no separate cellular technology or mobile set but the one which everyone uses—this feature being part of the normal settings, also arguably contributes to a sense of empowerment of such users like her. They do not feel segregated and yet enabled. Her experiences are very significant because till was overwhelmingly reliant on friends and writers to help her out This, according to her, altered completely once the computers came and juxtaposing her struggles and reliance on others in the pre-digital days with the present times when right from buying groceries to making financial transactions, acquiring teaching materials online or even to travel independently with the help of app cabs—she can literally do everything on her own with digital help. This has done wonders for her self- confidence and also added significantly to her identity building. It can thus be argued that in transforming 'disability' into 'ability' from a technical level to a physical plane, digital platforms do play a critical role.

Notwithstanding the tremendous enabling impact of the digital media, it is however difficult to generalize the positive effects of the digital platforms in enabling physically challenged women especially if they are economically weak. Considering that not everyone who is visually impaired can afford an iPhone or a JAWS program that needs to be bought, this aspect is similar to what Maya had shared during the FGD regarding the divisive impact or inequality spread by the digital media—discourses that often get obscured or missed amidst the celebratory perceptions of the digital world. Capacity building via digital means that contributes effectively to the processes of identity construction of the users thus relies heavily on the socio-economic background of the users. Many digital platforms however are not as yet sensitive to the issue or needs of physically challenged or visually impaired people. So while some sites and their apps are disabled friendly, others have not been designed in such a way, despite repeated demands. There are however many capacity building apps, like one floated by RBI that helps the visually challenged to identify banknotes on their own—a feature that undoubtedly has a tremendous empowering aspect saving them from being dependent on others and most importantly from being duped financially; 'Be My Eyes' app to get in touch with volunteers in one's locality to avail of medicines, food etc. The feature of 'Track the Ride' installed in Uber also helps in keeping families connected with the whereabouts of the users thus making mobility safer and also helping the user perform multiple roles. Ability to use apps or the capacity to lead a normal life has of course made life simpler for women who are physically disabled but have access and entry into the digital world—both socio-economically as well as human resource wise i.e they not only can afford those digital devices but also have friends and family who encourage them to participate in and have their



own share of digital experiences that ranges from functional to finding new hobbies, learning new skills like cooking etc. The intersection of gender, disability and economic status complicates the matter further.

DIGITAL LITERACY: THE GREAT DIVIDE

Education per se and more importantly digital literacy becomes an important factor influencing the identity building process of the users. And it might be argued that Dr. Tundawla could navigate through her disability and the digital world principally because of her education. Her stint into higher education arguably elevated her to a state where her blindness could not act as a deterrence. Taking off from her example, it would be interesting to explore whether a higher educational background itself would ensure greater digital skills. In other words, the inter-relationship and the difference between education and digital literacy becomes a significant factor for identity construction. -a fact that has been borne out by responses from a FGD conducted with schoolteachers in Kolkata where retired as also in-service school teachers admitted that each day they are discovering new things about how to use the digital platforms more effectively with the help of their students or grown-up children since "our generation does not actually know how to use it properly"; it also raises a number of related questions.

The above statistics categorically point out that the overwhelming reliance on and therefore access to the smartphone as a digital device of preference—a preference that again is more among the Kolkata users, even if by a few percentages, than among the Mumbai women respondents.

THE NATURE OF WOMEN'S DIGITAL IDENTITY

Both Online and Offline Surveys and Focus Group Discussions held with people from various walks of life as well as experts reveal that while women take to the social media for a plethora of reasons ranging from reconnecting with friends and family etc. to bolstering/making their professional image—all of these can be read as creation of self-identity.

The urge to communicate to others as also to keep track of what others are doing etc. are expressions of such creations of identity. Survey analysis shows that a wide percentage of respondents in both Mumbai and Kolkata prefer to share birthday and anniversary details on social media as also photographs pertaining to such events as also festive images, images of themselves, friends and family without much reservations or fear of being stalked, such images being secretly downloaded by stalkers etc. Networking and sharing emerge as key drivers of social media interaction and consequently, the content creation hovers around creation of identity that closely resembles on that would ensure greater collaboration.

The interactions however are not always limited to sharing of images but also includes quotations, emoji's, poetry and write up that reflect their desire to "become". As one respondent pointed out, I often put out my verses on the social media, and the appreciation that I get gives me a great amount of satisfaction. The recognition that interactive social media affords creates a sense of empowerment that women often seem to lack on offline spaces. Most respondents that we spoke to referred to the social media as a democratic space that engenders opportunities to realise unfulfilled desires.

AN AGENCY TOWARDS CREATING INDEPENDENT ECONOMIC IDENTITY

The different levels and layers of women's' agency vis-a-vis the digital medium needs to be understood and analysed. Broadly seen, the economic dimension of their identity formation generally translates into economic independence that ranges from the independence to choose e-commerce merchandise for personal use to buying groceries for household; from placing orders for medicines to launching own online start-up enterprise; from accessing google pay or paytm to transferring money through amazon pay—to name a few and prominent expressions of such agency. While all such expressions generally have an empowering subtext for women, there are instances when they feel terribly disempowered especially when they face financial fraudulence. In sum however, the financial autonomy that digital media accords women in dealing with their everyday life creates a sense of autonomy.

SOCIAL MEDIA & REACHING OUT

In response to questions as to what made them share such slices of private lives online, most respondents across the Metros shared that it was to connect and share their lives with friends and family existing virtually and the prospect of getting their images 'liked' and 'loved' on social media that makes them share more. This exercise of connecting by sharing images and news involves emotional investment that women make on relationships. For most women, it was an attempt at "reaching out". Social media posts are used to gauge the mood, the status and achievements of the respondents and relate appropriately. Social media thus becomes important in widening and deepening relationships. But it comes with a downside. All young women students mentioned, if their posts are not liked, it leads to anxieties, self-doubt and question of acceptability within their peer group—they keep counting the number of likes. And a lesser number of likes to a post creates self-doubts.

Thus, construction of 'I' itself is dependent on social media reach, presence, responses. The self-image and self-worth for women, especially those in the younger age bracket of 18-35 years integrally linked to social media presence. It is



Table 3:

| Q 20 What do you use the digital platform for? | | |
|---|-----------|---------|
| Mumbai | Frequency | Percent |
| Entertainment like watching videos, movies, etc | 183 | 64.4 |
| Connecting with family and friends | 202 | 71.1 |
| Shopping | 129 | 45.4 |
| Business/ professional purposes | 99 | 34.9 |
| Education like doing courses | 174 | 61.3 |
| News | 132 | 46.5 |
| Others | | |
| Total Sample | 284 | |
| | | |
| Kolkata | Frequency | Percent |
| Entertainment like watching videos, movies, etc | 215 | 89.2 |
| Connecting with family and friends | 204 | 84.6 |
| Shopping | 116 | 48.1 |
| Business/ professional purposes | 82 | 34.0 |
| Education like doing courses | 108 | 44.8 |
| News | 121 | 50.2 |
| Others | 11 | 4.6 |
| Total Sample | 241 | |

therefore not surprising and women across cities and age, use multiple social media apps multiple times in a day, largely for connecting with others. Such social media interaction is carried out with minimum concern for privacy. Though such expectations and responses problematize the concept of privacy and also blurs the boundaries between private and public.

The use of emojis also is very important and can be read both ways. On one hand it can be used as part of a fad. Emojis also are used habitually and not much emotion is invested in them each time. But emojis are very popular along with stickers, gifs etc. For emojis, there is a gender connotation also.

SEARCH FOR NEW IDENTITY/ FREEDOM

In both Mumbai and Kolkata, almost all women shared that they were initiated to social media by their friends. Almost none were taught about social media. The younger women categorically mentioned that they entered the social media space after completion of their school so as to 'exercise their freedom'. They were keen to construct and embody an identity different from that of a school goer; wanted to transform their identity and build something new one. Hence, when they interact on the social media, a different kind of identity creation and a space is being created that at times challenges the usual gender binaries. There have been instances, our respondents told us that in recent times when women bloggers or social media users have been perceived as men online and they do not seem to mind that. Social

media giants like Twitter have specific policies against profile impersonation that clearly states that anyone posing as or pretending to be another person, brand, or organization in a confusing or deceptive manner may be permanently suspended under Twitter's impersonation policy. While such rules pertain to fake profiles, assertion of gender-neutral digital identities is an important development and further research on this aspect can well bring out different nuances of gender identities and their consequent overlaps, creation of new identities, creation of new myths. Focus on such new gender-neutral identities can spark further discussions on the kind of mobility that is involved in such identity constructions and whether such processes of identity creations manage to cut across various social hierarchies.

DIGITAL IDENTITIES ONE OR MANY?

Women's identity online is mediated by the purpose for which such identity is created. It is therefore not unusual for women to by multiple identities or fake identities. While motivations for creation of false or fake profiles online range from hacking to cyber bullying to mundane reasons like fashioning and projecting a self-different and 'better' than the real one online to garner more 'likes', 'friends' etc. thus boosting one's ego⁷, hidden and embedded workings of patriarchy might also be inhibiting women's free self-expression in the offline world. Many respondents during surveys for this research indirectly spoke about how it is the men of the house who determine their smartphone



usage time or how the wives can log online only when their husband returns home (as a respondent from Horwath shared). While hardly any of them admitted to have created fake profiles, many shared how they do own multiple profiles on social media thus automatically giving fuel to the hypothesis that it is the need to live out different aspects of their personalities or perhaps to shape a chosen self –that is not possible within the traditional patriarchal structures of the family, that perhaps lead to multiple profiles or even fake profiles. Social media in many ways thus shapes multiple identities or realities that are false/pseudo, thus making interactions 'online' seem more real and true, especially to the youth as found from the research conducted for this project in Mumbai and Kolkata, than the offline interactions. This leads to a blurring of boundaries and creation of identities—different from the real self of the user. Like offline contexts, digital identity is thus the product of an individual's specific pattern of use, determined by variables such as interest, personality and skills.

Irrespective of the type of representation, the creation of multiple identities seems vital to explain the intricate intermingling of resources so evident in online spaces. This implies that women users have the potential to successfully participate in multilingual spaces, harbor different perspectives and choices to shuttle between the various realms of an integrated digital system. Thus users have the freedom to open any profile for themselves that does not necessarily reflect their real-life gender or identity.

CONCLUSION

Digitization of content and data, as well as new digital communication technologies, have opened up novel opportunities for women, giving them greater opportunities, better choices and more information of avenues that appeared unavailable hitherto. The convenience of digital media and work or shopping from home especially in time of lockdown and pandemic, when the survey was conducted points to the special benefits that Digital media has conferred in

reducing the subjectivity of women due to lack or limited social mobility. Home based women entrepreneurs and businesswomen as well as working women have found these to be particularly advantageous. The flexibility afforded by digital media allows for better work-life integration – a critical element in enabling women to effectively juggle multiple roles as workers, managers and caregivers. However, women's digital identities are always involved in search of newer new and perhaps unfulfilled persona's largely through interaction and interworking. As in the non digital world in the digital world too, women seek fulfilment through collaboration and networking in search for personas that give them a sense of free will.

Often the content that was created and shared on the digital media are related to different aspects of the of socio cultural lives of women. Goffman's idea that social interaction and face to face interaction are framed as theatrical performances, with the metaphor of the self as a performer and life being a stage with the back stage symbolizing privacy and private lives and the front stage symbolizing the public and public actions, easily translates to the notion of the digital identity being a mode of performance or theatrics that utilizes the online environment as a stage on which to perform

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