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## Depictions of Women and the Dynamics of Social Inequality in Bangladeshi Media: A Secondary Qualitative Approach

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This study examines the depictions of women and the dynamics of social inequality in Bangladeshi social media through a qualitative secondary data analysis. As digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok increasingly shape public discourse in Bangladesh, women's visibility has expanded in unprecedented ways. However, this expansion occurs within deeply entrenched patriarchal, socioeconomic, and technological structures. Drawing upon Feminist Media Theory, Intersectionality, Social Representation Theory, and Networked Public Sphere theory, the study synthesises existing qualitative research, digital rights reports, and policy analyses to explore how women are represented and regulated online. The findings reveal a paradoxical dynamic: social media simultaneously enables economic entrepreneurship, activism, and self-expression while reinforcing aesthetic regulation, moral policing, and gendered harassment. Intersectional inequalities, linked to class, geography, and digital access, further stratify women's participation. Algorithmic amplification and platform capitalism also shape the forms of visibility that are rewarded or marginalised. The study argues that Bangladeshi social media functions as a negotiated space where empowerment and structural constraint coexist. Addressing digital gender inequality, therefore, requires integrated cultural, technological, and policy interventions.

**Keywords:** women's representation; social media; gender inequality; Bangladesh; intersectionality; digital feminism

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has experienced an unprecedented digital transformation that has reshaped its communication landscape, political discourse, and socio-cultural dynamics. With rapid mobile internet penetration and affordable smartphones, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have become central arenas for public engagement and identity performance. As of the mid-2020s, millions of Bangladeshi users actively participate in online networks, making social media a significant site for negotiating gender identities and social power relations.

While digital platforms are often celebrated for democratizing communication and enabling marginalised voices (Castells, 2012), they do not operate outside existing social hierarchies. Rather, they are embedded within and frequently reproduce structural inequalities related to gender, class, religion, and geography. In Bangladesh, where patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched despite notable progress in female education and political representation, women's visibility in public spaces has long been contested. Social media, therefore, emerges as both an opportunity and a battleground for women's representation.

Traditional Bangladeshi media historically portrayed women within restrictive frameworks. Television dramas, advertisements, and print journalism frequently emphasised domesticity, beauty, and moral virtue, reinforcing gendered

divisions of labour (Jahan, 2015). Feminist scholars describe such portrayals as forms of symbolic annihilation, wherein women's complex realities are simplified or marginalised (Tuckman, 1978). Although social media has disrupted centralised media production by enabling user-generated content, the underlying cultural scripts that shape representation have not disappeared.

In digital environments, women are no longer solely represented by institutional gatekeepers; they actively produce content, cultivate audiences, and monetise digital visibility. Female entrepreneurs, activists, educators, and entertainers increasingly use social media to build communities and challenge stereotypes. However, this expansion of visibility has also intensified surveillance, harassment, and moral policing. Studies indicate that Bangladeshi women face disproportionate levels of cyberbullying, threats, and non-consensual image circulation (Islam & Rahman, 2020). Such practices reflect broader societal anxieties about women's autonomy and public participation.

The dual character of social media as a space of empowerment and a site of inequality necessitates a nuanced analysis. Women's representation online cannot be understood solely through celebratory narratives of digital liberation, nor through deterministic accounts of oppression. Instead, representation must be situated within intersecting systems of power. Gender inequality in Bangladesh intersects with class stratification, rural–urban divides, religious conservatism, and differential access to digital literacy. For example, urban middle-

class women may leverage digital platforms for professional advancement, whereas rural women may encounter barriers due to limited connectivity and social restrictions.

Moreover, algorithmic architectures shape visibility in ways that privilege certain types of content. Engagement-driven systems often amplify sensational, aestheticised, or controversial portrayals. This can result in the circulation of stereotypical femininity-emphasising beauty, fashion, and romantic relationships-while marginalising political or intellectual contributions. Thus, platform governance and digital capitalism influence how women are represented and perceived.

This study examines the depictions of women and the dynamics of social inequality in Bangladeshi social media through a secondary qualitative analysis of existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and digital rights reports. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the research synthesises existing qualitative findings to construct a theoretically grounded interpretation of representation patterns.

The study is guided by three primary research questions:

- How are women depicted across major social media platforms in Bangladesh?
- In what ways do these depictions reproduce or challenge existing structures of social inequality?
- How do digital platforms simultaneously function as sites of empowerment and marginalisation for women?

By integrating Feminist Media Theory, Intersectionality, and Social Representation Theory, this research contributes to South Asian gender and media scholarship. It extends debates on digital feminism by situating Bangladeshi social media within broader socio-cultural power dynamics. Furthermore, the study offers methodological insight into the value of secondary qualitative analysis in examining digital phenomena.

In a rapidly digitising society where online visibility increasingly shapes offline realities, understanding the representation of women in social media is not merely an academic exercise. It is central to broader discussions about democracy, citizenship, and social justice in contemporary Bangladesh.

## 2. Literature Review

This section critically reviews existing scholarship on gender representation, digital participation, online harassment, and intersectionality within global and South Asian contexts. It situates Bangladeshi social media within broader theoretical debates in feminist media studies and digital communication research. By synthesising empirical and theoretical contributions, the literature review identifies key patterns, conceptual gaps, and contextual limitations that inform the present study's analytical framework.

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Media Representation

The concept of representation occupies a central place in media and cultural studies. Hall (1997) argues that the media do not simply mirror reality but actively construct

meaning through symbolic systems. Representation shapes how audiences understand gender, power, and identity. Feminist media scholars have long critiqued how women are framed within patriarchal discourses (van Zoonen, 1994).

Early feminist research highlighted patterns of stereotyping, underrepresentation, and trivialization of women in mainstream media (Tuckman, 1978). Women were often portrayed as dependent, emotional, or confined to domestic roles. Such portrayals contributed to symbolic annihilation, reinforcing the perception that women's experiences were less significant in public life.

In South Asia, representation is further shaped by cultural traditions, religious norms, and postcolonial identities. Studies suggest that media narratives often position women as bearers of cultural authenticity and moral respectability (Ghosh, 2016). In Bangladesh, traditional media historically emphasised modesty and domestic virtue as markers of ideal femininity (Jahan, 2015).

## ***2.2 Social Media and Participatory Culture***

The emergence of social media introduced new possibilities for participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Platforms allow users to produce, share, and remix content, theoretically decentralising media power. Castells (2012) describes this transformation as the rise of "networked communication," enabling horizontal forms of interaction.

However, participatory structures do not automatically eliminate inequality. Boyd (2014) argues that digital spaces reproduce

offline social hierarchies. Access to technology, digital literacy, and economic resources influences who can participate effectively. In Bangladesh, gendered digital divides persist, with women in rural areas often facing restricted internet access (GSMA, 2022).

Furthermore, digital capitalism shapes platform dynamics. Algorithms prioritise engagement, often amplifying content that conforms to dominant aesthetic or emotional norms. This can encourage hyper-visibility of certain forms of femininity while marginalising dissenting voices.

## ***2.3 Gendered Harassment and Digital Violence***

Online harassment represents a significant barrier to women's digital participation. Research indicates that women globally experience disproportionate levels of abuse online (Jane, 2017). In Bangladesh, cyber harassment has emerged as a pressing issue, affecting students, journalists, and activists (Islam & Rahman, 2020).

Digital violence includes trolling, threats, doxxing, and non-consensual dissemination of images. These practices function as mechanisms of social control, discouraging women from expressing opinions or engaging in public debate. Feminist scholars interpret such harassment as an extension of patriarchal power into digital spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Legal frameworks in Bangladesh, including cybersecurity regulations, aim to address online crimes. However, enforcement gaps and cultural stigma often prevent women from seeking justice. Thus, representation

cannot be separated from questions of digital safety.

### ***2.4 Intersectionality and Structural Inequality***

Intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how gender interacts with other social categories (Crenshaw, 1989). In Bangladesh, class, religion, ethnicity, and geographic location shape women's experiences of digital media.

Urban middle-class influencers often dominate social media visibility, reflecting linguistic fluency, aesthetic capital, and access to technology. Meanwhile, garment workers, indigenous women, and religious minorities remain underrepresented. This uneven representation reinforces broader structural inequalities.

Scholars argue that digital empowerment narratives frequently overlook such disparities (Davis, 2018). While some women achieve economic independence through online entrepreneurship, others encounter intensified surveillance and moral scrutiny.

### ***2.5 Social Media Activism and Digital Feminism***

Despite challenges, social media has facilitated feminist activism. Hashtag movements and online campaigns enable collective mobilisation and awareness-raising. Banet-Weiser (2018) describes this phenomenon as "popular feminism," wherein digital culture amplifies feminist discourse.

In Bangladesh, online activism has addressed issues such as sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, and violence against women.

Digital platforms provide spaces for storytelling and solidarity. However, activism often triggers backlash, reflecting tensions between progressive and conservative forces.

### ***2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature***

Although scholarship on gender and digital media is expanding, several gaps remain in the Bangladeshi context:

- Limited integration of theoretical frameworks such as Intersectionality and Social Representation Theory.
- Insufficient synthesis of existing qualitative findings across platforms.
- A tendency to focus exclusively on victimisation without examining empowerment dynamics.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a secondary qualitative analysis that synthesises diverse sources through a multi-theoretical lens.

## ***3. Theoretical Framework***

Understanding the depictions of women and the dynamics of social inequality in Bangladeshi social media requires a multi-layered theoretical approach. Social media is not merely a technological infrastructure; it is a socio-cultural arena shaped by power relations, symbolic systems, and algorithmic logics. This study integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives: Feminist Media Theory, Intersectionality, Social Representation Theory, and Networked Public Sphere theory. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced interpretation of how gendered meanings are

constructed, circulated, and contested in digital environments.

### *3.1 Feminist Media Theory*

Feminist Media Theory provides the foundational lens for examining gender representation in media systems. Rooted in second-wave feminist scholarship, this theoretical tradition critiques how media institutions and cultural texts reproduce patriarchal ideologies (van Zoonen, 1994). Early feminist analyses demonstrated that media representations often position women within narrow roles—such as caregivers, romantic interests, or aesthetic objects—thereby limiting their perceived social agency (Tuckman, 1978).

In digital contexts, feminist media scholars argue that representation has become more complex but not necessarily more equitable. Banet-Weiser (2018) suggests that contemporary media culture produces “popular feminism,” where empowerment narratives coexist with commodified and sexualized portrayals of women. On platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, women may frame themselves as entrepreneurs, activists, or influencers; yet these identities are often shaped by aesthetic norms and market logics that reward visibility tied to beauty, lifestyle, and emotional appeal.

Feminist Media Theory emphasises that representation is not neutral but embedded within power relations. Even user-generated content is influenced by internalised gender norms and audience expectations. In Bangladesh, where modesty and moral propriety remain socially valorised, women’s

digital self-presentation is frequently negotiated within cultural boundaries. The fear of social backlash or reputational harm may shape how women curate their online identities.

Moreover, digital harassment reflects what feminist theorists describe as patriarchal backlash. When women challenge established norms, they may encounter coordinated trolling or moral policing. Thus, digital representation cannot be understood apart from the gendered power structures that regulate women’s visibility.

### *3.2 Intersectionality*

Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), expands feminist analysis by emphasising that gender does not operate in isolation from other axes of identity such as class, race, religion, and geography. Although originally conceptualised in the context of Black feminist legal theory, intersectionality has become a foundational framework in global gender studies.

In the Bangladeshi context, intersectionality is particularly relevant. Women’s experiences of social media vary significantly depending on socioeconomic status, urban–rural location, linguistic capital, and religious identity. For instance, an English-speaking, urban, middle-class content creator may have greater access to technological resources and brand partnerships than a rural garment worker with limited digital literacy. Intersectional analysis thus prevents homogenization of “Bangladeshi women” as a single category.

Furthermore, intersectionality highlights how digital exclusion mirrors structural

inequality. Access to smartphones, stable internet, and digital skills is unevenly distributed (GSMA, 2022). Women in conservative communities may face restrictions on online engagement, reinforcing gendered mobility constraints. In this sense, digital inequality is both technological and cultural.

Intersectionality also illuminates the layered nature of online harassment. Women who belong to religious or ethnic minorities may experience abuse that targets multiple aspects of their identity simultaneously. Therefore, examining representation through an intersectional lens allows this study to capture the complexity of inequality embedded within digital platforms.

### *3.3 Social Representation Theory*

Social Representation Theory, developed by Moscovici (1984), offers a framework for understanding how collective knowledge and shared meanings are constructed through communication. Social representations are systems of values, ideas, and practices that enable individuals to interpret social reality. Media plays a central role in producing and circulating these shared understandings.

In the context of social media, representations of women are not isolated images but part of broader symbolic systems. Repeated portrayals—such as the “ideal wife,” “modern influencer,” or “immoral woman”—become cognitive templates through which audiences interpret female behaviour. These representations influence societal expectations and judgments.

Unlike traditional media, social media accelerates the production and circulation of

representations. Content is rapidly shared, remixed, and commented upon, creating participatory meaning-making processes. However, the speed and virality of digital communication can entrench stereotypes rather than challenge them. Algorithmic amplification further solidifies dominant narratives by prioritising content that generates high engagement.

Social Representation Theory, therefore, helps explain how certain depictions become normalised and how they contribute to the reproduction of inequality. When audiences repeatedly encounter portrayals that emphasise women’s physical appearance over intellectual contributions, such representations may shape broader social attitudes toward gender roles.

### *3.4 The Networked Public Sphere*

The concept of the networked public sphere (Castells, 2012) provides an additional dimension to this framework. Social media platforms create decentralised communication networks that enable individuals to participate in public discourse. Unlike traditional mass media, where gatekeepers control information flow, digital platforms allow horizontal interaction.

However, this networked structure does not guarantee equal participation. Platform algorithms, corporate governance policies, and digital literacy disparities shape whose voices gain prominence. As Boyd (2014) notes, networked publics are shaped by persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability—features that influence how content circulates and how identities are constructed.

In Bangladesh, the networked public sphere has facilitated feminist activism, online campaigns against harassment, and digital entrepreneurship. At the same time, it has enabled coordinated misogynistic attacks and the rapid spread of defamatory content. Thus, the networked public sphere functions as both an emancipatory and regulatory space.

### ***3.5 Integrative Theoretical Model***

By combining Feminist Media Theory, Intersectionality, Social Representation Theory, and Networked Public Sphere theory, this study constructs an integrative analytical model:

- Feminist Media Theory explains how patriarchal norms shape representation.
- Intersectionality reveals layered inequalities within women's digital experiences.
- Social Representation Theory illuminates the construction and normalisation of gendered meanings.
- Networked Public Sphere theory contextualises representation within digital communication structures.

This integrated framework enables a comprehensive analysis of how Bangladeshi social media simultaneously empowers and constrains women. It acknowledges structural inequality while recognising digital agency.

## **4. Research Methodology**

This section outlines the qualitative secondary research design employed in the study. It explains the rationale for using

secondary data analysis, describes the sampling strategy and data sources, and details the thematic analytical procedures. Ethical considerations and methodological limitations are also addressed to ensure transparency and academic rigour.

### ***4.1 Research Design***

This study employs a qualitative secondary data analysis design. Secondary qualitative analysis involves the systematic re-examination of existing qualitative research, reports, and textual materials to generate new theoretical insights (Heaton, 2004). Given the extensive body of scholarship on gender and digital media in Bangladesh, this approach allows for synthesis and reinterpretation rather than duplication of empirical data collection.

Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the research seeks to understand meanings, representations, and power dynamics rather than measure statistical correlations. Representation is inherently interpretive; therefore, thematic and discursive analysis are central to the research design.

### ***4.2 Data Sources***

Data were drawn from multiple categories of publicly available sources:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on gender and social media in Bangladesh.
- Reports from digital rights organisations and NGOs.
- Policy documents addressing cybercrime and online safety.

- Academic theses and conference proceedings.
- Media analyses focusing on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok content trends.

These platforms were selected because they represent the most widely used social media environments in Bangladesh. The study focused on publications between 2010 and 2025 to capture the evolution of digital representation over time.

### *4.3 Sampling Strategy*

Purposive sampling was employed to identify relevant materials. Inclusion criteria required that sources:

- Focus explicitly on Bangladesh.
- Address women's representation or gendered digital experiences.
- Employ qualitative or mixed-method approaches.
- Provide substantive discussion of social media content.

Approximately 45–60 sources were initially reviewed, with 40 core texts selected for in-depth analysis. This sample size allowed for thematic saturation while maintaining analytical depth.

### *4.4 Data Analysis Procedure*

The study utilised thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

- Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading.
- Generation of initial codes (e.g., empowerment, moral policing,

objectification, entrepreneurship, activism).

- Searching for patterns across sources.
- Reviewing themes for coherence.
- Defining and naming themes.
- Integrating themes with theoretical constructs.

Coding was both deductive and inductive. Deductive codes were informed by the theoretical framework (e.g., intersectional inequality), while inductive codes emerged from recurring patterns within the literature.

The analytical process emphasised reflexivity. As representation analysis involves interpretive judgment, awareness of the researcher's positionality was maintained throughout the coding process.

### *4.5 Ethical Considerations*

Because this study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, no human participants were directly involved. However, ethical sensitivity was exercised when discussing cases of digital harassment and abuse. The study avoids reproducing harmful content or identifying individual victims.

### *4.6 Limitations*

Secondary qualitative analysis depends on the scope and quality of existing research. Some marginalised voices may remain underrepresented in published scholarship. Additionally, rapidly evolving platform dynamics may outpace academic documentation.

Despite these limitations, the methodology offers a comprehensive and theoretically grounded synthesis of current knowledge. By

integrating diverse qualitative findings, the study provides a robust analysis of women's representation and social inequality in Bangladeshi social media.

## 5. Findings

The thematic analysis of secondary qualitative data reveals that Bangladeshi social media constitutes a contested terrain where women's visibility is simultaneously expanded and regulated. Across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, five major themes emerge: performative femininity and aesthetic regulation, digital entrepreneurship and economic agency, online harassment and moral policing, activist counter-publics and feminist resistance, and intersectional digital inequality. These themes illustrate how representation operates within layered structures of power while also generating new forms of agency.

### 5.1 Performative Femininity and Aesthetic Regulation

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed literature is the dominance of aestheticised and performative representations of women. On visually driven platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, female content creators frequently gain visibility through beauty-oriented, fashion-focused, or lifestyle content. This aligns with broader global patterns in digital culture, where algorithmic systems privilege visually engaging and emotionally resonant content (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In Bangladesh, however, aesthetic performance is mediated by cultural norms

emphasising modesty and respectability. Women often negotiate a delicate balance between modernity and moral acceptability. For instance, content that appears "too Western" or perceived as violating conservative dress codes frequently attracts negative commentary. Such reactions demonstrate how digital representation is embedded in offline patriarchal norms (Islam & Rahman, 2020).

Thematic coding reveals that women's bodies often become central sites of evaluation. Comment sections frequently contain judgments regarding appearance, clothing, and behaviour. This reflects what Tuckman (1978) termed symbolic annihilation: while women are visible, their visibility is constrained within narrow frameworks of beauty and propriety. Rather than being evaluated for intellectual or professional contributions, women's social media presence is often assessed through aesthetic criteria.

Algorithmic amplification further reinforces these norms. Engagement metrics reward sensational or visually curated content, which may encourage self-objectification. Although women actively participate in crafting their digital personas, their choices are shaped by platform incentives and audience expectations. Thus, empowerment is interwoven with structural constraints.

### 5.2 Digital Entrepreneurship and Economic Agency

Despite aesthetic pressures, social media has opened significant avenues for economic empowerment. Numerous studies highlight the growth of female-led online businesses in

Bangladesh, particularly through Facebook-based commerce. Women entrepreneurs operate home-based boutiques, catering services, educational coaching platforms, and handmade crafts enterprises.

This trend is especially significant in a socio-cultural context where women's mobility may be restricted. Social media allows women to generate income without leaving domestic spaces, thereby navigating patriarchal limitations. Castells (2012) describes such digital participation as part of networked economic transformation, where individuals leverage online networks for market access.

Qualitative accounts indicate that many women perceive social media entrepreneurship as a pathway to financial independence and self-confidence. Digital visibility enables brand building, customer interaction, and peer support networks. For middle-class urban women, YouTube channels dedicated to education, cooking, or technology reviews have become viable income sources.

However, intersectional analysis reveals disparities. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to digital literacy training, marketing skills, or stable internet connectivity (GSMA, 2022). Moreover, algorithmic competition favours accounts with existing social capital. Thus, while digital entrepreneurship expands opportunity, it does not eliminate structural inequality.

The findings suggest that representation in entrepreneurial contexts shifts from passive objectification to active agency. Women

portray themselves as business owners and experts. Yet even in entrepreneurial spaces, aesthetic presentation remains significant. Successful online sellers frequently curate polished visual branding, reinforcing the intertwining of commerce and appearance.

### *5.3 Online Harassment and Moral Policing*

A pervasive theme across the literature is gendered online harassment. Women's increased visibility has been accompanied by heightened vulnerability to abuse. Cyber harassment includes derogatory comments, sexualized threats, doxxing, and non-consensual image dissemination (Islam & Rahman, 2020).

Such harassment functions as a mechanism of moral policing. Women who express political opinions, advocate feminist positions, or challenge religious norms are often targeted. Jane (2017) characterises online misogyny as a form of digital disciplining, aimed at silencing dissent and reinforcing gender hierarchies.

In Bangladesh, where social honour and family reputation hold significant cultural weight, online defamation carries profound consequences. Victims may face offline repercussions, including social ostracism or familial pressure. This dynamic illustrates the permeability between digital and physical spaces.

Thematic analysis indicates that fear of harassment shapes self-censorship. Many women limit political commentary or avoid posting personal photographs to minimise risk. Thus, representation is not merely about

what is visible but also about what remains unexpressed due to anticipated backlash.

Legal frameworks addressing cybercrime exist, yet enforcement gaps persist. Women frequently hesitate to pursue formal complaints due to stigma or lack of institutional trust. Consequently, online harassment contributes to a climate of constrained participation.

#### *5.4 Activist Counter-Publics and Feminist Resistance*

Alongside harassment, social media has facilitated feminist mobilisation. Digital platforms enable the formation of counter-publics, spaces where marginalised voices articulate alternative narratives (Castells, 2012). Bangladeshi women have used Facebook and YouTube to document experiences of harassment, organise campaigns, and challenge victim-blaming discourses.

Hashtag activism and awareness campaigns illustrate how digital communication can transform individual grievances into collective issues. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that such practices represent a form of popular feminism, where empowerment narratives circulate widely. In Bangladesh, online activism has contributed to public debates about workplace harassment, domestic violence, and gender discrimination.

These activist representations disrupt traditional portrayals of women as passive victims. Women appear as advocates, organisers, and knowledge producers. Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1984) suggests that repeated exposure to such

counter-narratives can reshape collective understanding.

However, activist visibility often triggers backlash. Conservative groups may frame feminist discourse as culturally alien or morally threatening. Thus, digital resistance coexists with intensified ideological contestation.

#### *5.5 Intersectional Digital Inequality*

A central finding is that women's social media representation is deeply stratified. Intersectional factors such as class, education, language proficiency, and geographic location shape digital participation. Urban, English-speaking influencers dominate visibility, reflecting existing socioeconomic hierarchies.

Rural women and those from marginalised communities are underrepresented in mainstream digital narratives. Limited access to smartphones and digital skills contributes to exclusion (GSMA, 2022). Additionally, cultural norms in conservative regions may restrict women's online presence.

Intersectionality also influences harassment patterns. Minority women may face abuse targeting both gender and religious identity. This layered discrimination underscores Crenshaw's (1989) argument that inequality operates through intersecting axes.

Thus, while social media expands representation, it does so unevenly. Visibility is not synonymous with equality; rather, it mirrors structural stratification.

### ***5.6 Algorithmic Amplification and Commercial Logics***

Another emerging theme concerns algorithmic governance. Platform algorithms prioritise engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time. Content that evokes strong emotional responses-whether admiration or outrage- often achieves greater reach.

This dynamic can incentivise sensationalised portrayals. Women who conform to popular beauty standards may gain followers more rapidly. Conversely, content focused on academic or policy discussions may receive limited traction.

Digital capitalism, therefore, shapes representation. Women's visibility becomes intertwined with marketability. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, empowerment narratives may be commodified, transforming feminist identity into a brandable aesthetic.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Bangladeshi social media functions as a paradoxical space. It expands opportunities for self-expression, economic participation, and activism, yet simultaneously reproduces patriarchal surveillance, aesthetic regulation, and intersectional inequality.

Women are neither purely victims nor entirely liberated agents. Their digital representations are negotiated within complex socio-cultural and technological structures. Feminist Media Theory explains persistent objectification; Intersectionality highlights stratification; Social Representation Theory reveals normalisation

processes; and Networked Public Sphere theory contextualises digital activism.

The findings underscore that representation is a dynamic process shaped by power, resistance, and technological mediation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing gender inequality in Bangladesh's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

## **6. Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that social media in Bangladesh operates as a complex and contested arena where gender representation is continuously negotiated. Rather than functioning solely as a liberatory platform or a site of oppression, digital media simultaneously enables empowerment and reproduces structural inequality. By interpreting the findings through Feminist Media Theory, Intersectionality, Social Representation Theory, and Networked Public Sphere theory, this discussion situates Bangladeshi women's digital representation within broader socio-cultural and technological power structures.

### ***6.1 Negotiated Visibility: Between Empowerment and Regulation***

One of the central paradoxes emerging from the findings is the expansion of women's visibility alongside intensified regulation. Digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok allow women to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and curate their own narratives. This aligns with Castells' (2012) conception of the networked public sphere, where decentralised communication fosters participatory engagement.

However, increased visibility does not equate to unqualified freedom. Feminist Media Theory emphasises that representation remains embedded in patriarchal structures (van Zoonen, 1994). The findings demonstrate that Bangladeshi women's online presence is shaped by deeply rooted expectations regarding modesty, morality, and domestic respectability. Digital self-representation becomes a negotiation between modernity and cultural conformity.

Women who embrace entrepreneurial or activist roles often encounter moral scrutiny. The disciplining of female visibility through online harassment reflects what Jane (2017) describes as misogynistic regulation in digital spaces. Thus, while platforms offer opportunities for expression, they also amplify mechanisms of surveillance and social control.

This duality suggests that digital empowerment is conditional rather than absolute. Women's agency operates within boundaries structured by audience norms, algorithmic logic, and cultural expectations.

## ***6.2 Aesthetic Capital and Algorithmic Power***

The findings indicate that aestheticised femininity remains a dominant mode of visibility. Content emphasising beauty, fashion, and lifestyle often receives higher engagement, reflecting platform algorithms that reward visual appeal and emotional resonance. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that contemporary digital culture commodifies empowerment, transforming feminist expression into a marketable aesthetic.

In Bangladesh, aesthetic regulation intersects with religious and cultural norms. Women must navigate between being “modern” enough to attract digital audiences and “respectable” enough to avoid social backlash. This balancing act illustrates how algorithmic power interacts with patriarchal values.

Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1984) provides insight into how repeated portrayals normalise specific images of femininity. When audiences consistently encounter representations centred on appearance, these images solidify into shared cognitive frameworks. Over time, such representations shape societal expectations regarding women's roles and value.

Moreover, algorithmic amplification can marginalise intellectual or political content produced by women. Discussions on policy reform, academic scholarship, or social justice may receive less engagement compared to lifestyle-oriented material. This dynamic reflects broader patterns in digital capitalism, where attention becomes a currency that privileges spectacle over substance.

Thus, representation is mediated not only by cultural norms but also by technological infrastructures that shape visibility.

## ***6.3 Digital Entrepreneurship: Agency within Constraint***

The expansion of female-led digital entrepreneurship represents a significant shift in gender dynamics. Social media commerce enables women to generate income while navigating mobility restrictions. This aligns with Castells' (2012) argument that

networked economies transform traditional labour structures.

From a feminist perspective, economic participation enhances autonomy and bargaining power within households. Women entrepreneurs who operate Facebook-based businesses or YouTube channels often describe increased self-confidence and social recognition. Such developments challenge narratives of passive femininity.

However, intersectional analysis reveals that digital entrepreneurship is unevenly distributed. Access to stable internet, marketing knowledge, and financial capital remains stratified (GSMA, 2022). Urban middle-class women disproportionately benefit from digital marketplaces, while rural or lower-income women face barriers to entry.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework underscores that empowerment is shaped by overlapping inequalities. Gender intersects with class, education, and geography, producing differentiated outcomes. Therefore, digital entrepreneurship cannot be romanticised as universally transformative; it remains embedded within structural hierarchies.

#### ***6.4 Harassment as Digital Patriarchy***

Online harassment emerges as a central mechanism through which patriarchal norms are reproduced in digital spaces. The prevalence of cyberbullying, threats, and moral policing reflects an attempt to regulate women's public presence (Islam & Rahman, 2020).

Feminist scholarship conceptualises such harassment as an extension of offline gendered violence (Jane, 2017). In Bangladesh, where honour and reputation hold significant social value, online defamation can have severe offline consequences. Women may withdraw from digital engagement to avoid stigma, thereby limiting their participation in public discourse.

The persistence of harassment challenges the notion that digital spaces are inherently democratising. Instead, they replicate existing power relations. The networked public sphere may amplify marginalised voices, but it also enables coordinated misogynistic attacks.

This dynamic illustrates the limits of technological determinism. Platforms alone cannot dismantle patriarchal structures; without institutional accountability and cultural transformation, inequality persists.

#### ***6.5 Counter-Publics and Feminist Resistance***

Despite constraints, social media has facilitated the emergence of feminist counter-publics. Women have used digital platforms to share testimonies, mobilise campaigns, and contest victim-blaming narratives. These practices exemplify what Castells (2012) terms "networks of outrage and hope."

Through collective storytelling and hashtag activism, women reframe representation from passive victimhood to active resistance. Social Representation Theory suggests that repeated exposure to such counter-narratives can reshape collective understanding (Moscovici, 1984). Digital campaigns

challenge stereotypes and demand institutional accountability.

However, feminist activism often triggers backlash. Conservative groups may portray gender equality discourse as culturally threatening. This polarisation underscores the contested nature of digital representation.

Nonetheless, the presence of counter-publics indicates that social media is not merely a site of oppression. It is also a space where hegemonic narratives can be contested and reimagined.

### *6.6 Structural Inequality in the Digital Age*

The broader implication of these findings is that social media reflects-and sometimes intensifies-structural inequality. Gender disparities intersect with economic stratification and digital divides. Access to devices, data affordability, and digital literacy remain uneven (GSMA, 2022).

Moreover, representation is shaped by corporate platform governance. Algorithmic systems prioritise engagement and profitability, influencing which narratives gain prominence. Women's visibility thus becomes entangled with market logics.

From an intersectional standpoint, addressing inequality requires attention to both cultural norms and technological infrastructure. Policy interventions aimed at improving digital literacy, strengthening cyber safety mechanisms, and promoting inclusive platform governance are essential.

### *6.7 Theoretical Implications*

The integration of theoretical frameworks provides several insights:

- Feminist Media Theory explains the persistence of objectification and moral regulation.
- Intersectionality highlights the stratified nature of empowerment.
- Social Representation Theory elucidates how repeated portrayals normalise gender norms.
- Networked Public Sphere theory contextualises both activism and harassment within digital communication structures.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that representation is a dynamic interplay of agency, structure, and technology.

The discussion underscores that Bangladeshi social media is neither wholly emancipatory nor entirely oppressive. It is a space of negotiated power. Women exercise agency through entrepreneurship and activism, yet their participation remains shaped by patriarchal values and algorithmic governance.

Digital representation thus mirrors broader societal contradictions. As Bangladesh continues its rapid technological expansion, the struggle over women's visibility and equality will increasingly unfold online. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for advancing gender justice in the digital age.

## 7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that Bangladeshi social media constitutes a complex digital terrain where women's representation is simultaneously expanded and constrained. The rise of networked communication has enabled women to claim visibility as entrepreneurs, activists, educators, and cultural producers. Digital platforms provide alternative pathways to economic participation and public engagement that were historically limited by traditional media gatekeeping and socio-cultural mobility restrictions.

However, increased visibility does not automatically translate into structural equality. Representation remains shaped by patriarchal norms, aesthetic expectations, and moral surveillance. Women's digital participation is frequently accompanied by harassment, reputational risk, and self-censorship. Algorithmic systems further complicate this landscape by amplifying content that aligns with dominant aesthetic and engagement-driven logics. Consequently, social media reproduces many of the inequalities embedded within offline social structures.

Intersectional analysis reveals that empowerment is unevenly distributed. Urban, middle-class, digitally literate women often benefit most from online entrepreneurship and influencer economies, while rural and economically marginalised women encounter significant access barriers. The digital divide thus mirrors broader socioeconomic stratification.

### Policy Implications

- **Strengthening Digital Safety Frameworks:** Regulatory institutions should enhance enforcement mechanisms against cyber harassment while ensuring that digital security laws do not suppress legitimate expression. Transparent reporting systems and victim-support services are essential.
- **Digital Literacy and Inclusion Programs:** Government and civil society initiatives should prioritise digital literacy training for women in rural and marginalised communities. Expanding affordable internet access can reduce intersectional inequalities.
- **Platform Accountability and Algorithmic Transparency:** Social media companies should implement gender-sensitive content moderation policies and increase transparency regarding algorithmic amplification processes.
- **Promotion of Diverse Representation:** Educational institutions and media organisations should encourage content that highlights women's intellectual, professional, and leadership roles beyond aesthetic narratives.
- **Support for Digital Feminist Networks:** Civil society organisations can facilitate safe online communities where women share experiences and mobilise collectively against discrimination.

In conclusion, Bangladeshi social media should be understood not as a monolithic

force but as a negotiated space shaped by cultural norms, technological infrastructures, and economic incentives. Advancing gender equality in digital environments requires coordinated efforts across policy, education, platform governance, and cultural transformation. Sustainable change will emerge not solely from increased access but from structural reforms that address the intertwined dynamics of representation, power, and inequality.

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