

Digital Working Paper

School of Development Studies
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi



Development
Dialogues

11/2026

Online Spaces and Women:
A Digital Ethnography Enquiry

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Online Spaces and Women:

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Abstract

This paper examines how women construct, perform, and commodify "empowerment" through Instagram content creation within the specificity of the Indian digital landscape. Using a digital ethnographic approach, this research conducts an in-depth examination of 15 posts across five content creators engaged in creating content on and around women's empowerment. Through observational immersion, visual and textual analysis, it argues that empowerment on Instagram operates as a contested process, simultaneously liberating and constraining, authentic and performed, and like. This process involves curating aesthetic presentations, performing the 'authentic' self, deploying narratives of resistance and agency, and expending significant affective and emotional labour. The study demonstrates how women creators navigate the politics of respectability and moral policing, and in the whole process empowerment, at times, itself becomes commodified as part of platform economies. Rather than celebrating Instagram as a liberating space or dismissing it as purely exploitative, the paper insists on critical engagement with the specific mechanisms through which platforms shape empowerment discourse and constrain possibilities.

1. Introduction

Social Media platforms have emerged as primary sites for the production, circulation, and negotiation of gendered identities in contemporary times. With TikTok banned in India since June 2020, Instagram has become particularly influential as a visual economy, built on aesthetics, visibility, and audience engagement. The growing institutional recognition of the creator economy in India through the recent policy developments, including investments in the Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming and Comics (AVGC) training, and content creator labs, intensifies the relevance of analysing digital platforms as socio-political and economic infrastructures. These platforms are no longer just social networking sites but marketplace, media distribution infrastructure, and an aspirational stage for self-branding.

For women, this offers a respite from constrained physical spaces restricting their mobility and voices. It provides opportunities for women to narrate their personal stories, share opinions, contest norms, and construct new identities without facing immediate physical restrictions. These spaces function both as sites of visibility and as spaces of anonymity, where individuals

can choose to express themselves without necessarily being identifiable or directly targeted. In this way, online spaces can become sites of liberation and empowerment for women. What we witness is “platformization of feminism,” where complex structural issues are simplified into inspirational, personalized forms of empowerment (Barbala, 2024). Many women use this space to make content focused on women’s empowerment. However, empowerment in this context, is shaped by a postfeminist neoliberal sensibility, privileging narratives of individual resilience and personal transformation over structural or collective feminist critique (McGill, 2020).

Online platforms like Instagram do not work in isolation. They work in specific economic and technical structures. Digital platforms operate through what Srnicek (2017) terms *platform capitalism*, where value is generated through data extraction, algorithmic sorting, and the monetization of user attention. Instagram functions within this logic where the user data and engagement patterns shape algorithmic visibility, determining which content circulates widely and which remains marginal. It is important to note that algorithms are not neutral but embedded in social biases and platform priorities. For women creators producing women empowerment content, these factors become an additional layer that needs to be navigated to gain visibility. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how women content creators on Instagram construct and perform women’s empowerment. It explores how empowerment is articulated through aesthetic self-presentation, performances of authenticity, narratives of resistance and agency, and the affective and emotional labour required to sustain visibility on the platform. At the same time, it considers how creators through their content navigate the politics of respectability and moral policing, and how empowerment itself becomes commodified within the social media platform economy.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative digital ethnographic approach to understand how women are constructing and performing ‘empowerment’ in digitally mediated environments. In this study, social media platforms are viewed as embedded, embodied, and everyday spaces (Hine, 2015) to unpack the meaning-making of ‘empowerment’ or ‘empowered spaces’ by women in the online world. Instagram was chosen as a site of study because of the growing popularity of ‘reels’ (Instagram, 2020) and drawing inspiration from women content creators from different regions of India, especially rural areas. The field was further constructed using a logic of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as well as purposive and convenience sampling

rather than representativeness. Thus, public profiles of Indian women content creators creating content in either Hindi or English were chosen based on their relevance to the research questions. It was critical that each profile consistently created empowerment-oriented content, demonstrated sustained posting preferences, and engaged with platform affordances such as trending audio, templates, and strategic captioning.

Profiles were identified using hashtag mapping: #womenempowerment #womenemp #equality #womenrights. Given the vastness of the field, engagement-based filtering was applied to navigate algorithmic governance and to avoid selecting only highly visible profiles. Accordingly, three tiers were established: micro-creators (less than 20,000 followers, no paid sponsorships); mid-creators (20,000-100,000 followers, with or without paid sponsorships); and influencers¹ (100,000-1 million followers). A total of five profiles- one micro, two mid-tier, and two influencers were selected. Fifteen posts were selected using the pin feature of Instagram, where pinned posts were absent, they were chosen based on alignment with research objectives through observational immersion.

This research, drawing on principles outlined in Pink et. al (2016), treats digital environments as experiential fields. The content posted on the Instagram app does not exist in isolation; it is shaped by platform infrastructures, and networked interactions. The three pillars of the analytical framework are: observational immersion (image-centric), visual analysis (gazes, poses, lighting, background, clothing, etc.), and textual analysis (captions, hashtags, sub-titles). Background music, tonal modulations, pauses, editing techniques were documented as part of affective and aesthetic labour. The analysis followed an abductive process combining inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Initially, open coding tried to identify recurring patterns in empowerment discourse and platform adaptation. These were then consolidated into higher-order categories. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout to account for our own positionality and interpretive assumptions. Through this analytical framework, we were able to analyse 'empowerment' in three interconnected ways: empowerment as discursive practice, affective practice and platform practice.

¹ There is no definition of Influencer, but someone is referred to as an influencer when they are essentially using social media to influence others. They promote products, services and lifestyles to their followers. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zyf37v4#zww73qt>

3. Lights, Camera, Action: Aesthetic Presentation and Visibility

Instagram content creation goes beyond the narrative of the video; it is deeply shaped by aesthetic considerations. Visual and auditory elements-including background settings, music choices, clothing, and editing techniques- are a carefully crafted aesthetic strategy to maximize reach, visibility, and engagement. Different Instagram content creators employ different visual and platform strategies. Micro-creators present empowerment through raw authenticity. Aditi² speaks directly to the camera in natural light with no special editing, often in vernacular Hindi (with subtitles). Her aesthetic is unpolished and intimate, resembling a private diary. This content often becomes viral though production values remain minimal.

Mid-tier creators blend relatability with trend-chasing. For instance, Priya³ uses a pastel-hued background and trendy pop music while doing a makeup tutorial; she overlays provocative women empowerment text to hook viewers. This marries lifestyle vlogging (GRWM makeup routines) with social messaging, a strategy attuned to Instagram's Reels format and algorithms, which takes into account declining attention spans of the audience. Less textual (which are provocative words) and more visuals are used to capture attention. Popular music amplifies trendiness, optimizing for the reels algorithm attention. The merging of vlogging and activism is a neoliberal tactic where beauty labour becomes a medium for narrativizing empowerment, boosting engagement via aspirational intimacy. Anjali (mid-tier author/activist) posts well-composed talk segments, often reacting to popular films or societal tropes; her videos use polished overlays and occasionally Indian signifiers (theatrical dialogue, English captions). Both mid-tier accounts leverage recognizable formats (viral audios, fashionably framed selfies) to disseminate social commentary, which is called templatization (Bhatia et al., 2024). Priya, for example, followed the "makeup plus call-out" template, while Anjali used the familiar "review film + life lesson" template.

Influencer-level creators fully exploit high-production aesthetics and platform features. Mona's⁴ video on sexual violence juxtaposes a dramatic violin score, on-camera gym footage, and news clips in a polished montage. These differences fit larger critiques of Instagram's aesthetic regime. Instagram's algorithm prioritizes "brightly lit, symmetrical, 'clean', and

² All the names of the creators used in this study are pseudonyms. Although the analysed Instagram accounts are publicly accessible, details have been altered to maintain ethical research practice as prior consent to use their original account details and names was not sought.

³ Describes herself as "5feet 2 inches feminist chaos", produces content using trendy reels format with social messaging around women's rights

⁴ Describes herself as a hybrid athlete and creates content around women's bodies and related issues merging it with fitness and lifestyle

emotionally unprovocative” images, rewarding polished visual labour (Rakshit, 2025; Pillai, 2025). Accordingly, influencer and mid-tier content emphasize flawless beauty (makeup filters, tidy backdrops) and concise, upbeat messaging, aligning with the platform’s default “aesthetic hegemony” of upper-class taste (Pillai, 2025; Rakshit, 2025). Micro-creators have less capacity to conform to these norms; they rely instead on narrative sincerity. In short, micro-creators present authenticity with minimal tech. Mid-tier creators hybridize personal authenticity and viral style, and influencer-tier creators adopt globalized, commodity-driven aesthetics, a pattern Bhatia et al. (2024) term cultural brokering (foregrounding local reality within globalized digital forms). Rajpuria and Ganesh (2020) share the aesthetics, polished corporate attire, and career imagery, epitomize the aspirations of *upper*-class “empowered” women which are inaccessible for working-class and marginalized women. In effect, Instagram empowerment often mimics a Western-style neoliberal femininity, rewarding those with the cultural capital to perform it. Here we see affective and immaterial labour (Senft, 2013), visibility Labour (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022), aesthetic and psychic labour (McGill, 2020; Gill, 2017), and unpaid intellectual labour (Rakshit, 2025) being performed.

4. Narratives of Resistance and Agency

In the posts across the tiers, narratives of empowerment and resistance take distinct forms. Micro-creator Aditi uses agency through personal storytelling; her core narrative is rejecting patriarchal demands and familial monitoring. In one post, she literally narrated a confrontation (“At every little thing, scaring me with threat of marriage”). By publicly refusing her mother’s threats of forced marriage, as a dramatic enactment of counter-surveillance, moving a private injustice into public online space. This raw confessional style embodies Gill’s (2007) idea of subjectification, where Aditi “self-authors” her voice under patriarchal scrutiny. Her agency is discursive and affective.

To remain relatable, creators use real life stories to offer strategic glimpses into their private lives. Through strategic self-presentation, personal branding, and impression management, influencers balance private and public selves while maintaining engagement with followers (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022). They turn the patriarchal gaze outward where women turn the camera back on society (their relatives, village norms, abusive suitors) to reclaim narrative power. Instagram offers a kind of “digital gaze reversal” (Gill, 2007),

Mid-tier creators shared broader social stories, speaking about systemic oppression through popular cultural frames. Anjali’s reel on the film *Haq*, for instance, uses the movie’s narrative

as a launching point to critique familial honour culture. Through her voiceover, she highlights how patriarchy privileges “family name over a woman’s existence” and concludes by redefining “victory” as rejecting an oppressive destiny. In doing so, she universalizes her message, inviting women to “choose yourself” rather than wait for society to change. Her narrative thus moves beyond her personal life to frame women’s freedom through a broader cultural allegory. Similarly, Priya employs a more coded style, embedding feminist critiques within humour and irony. In both cases, empowerment is largely discursive and inspirational, where these creators speak on behalf of women’s collective experiences rather than narrating deeply personal stories. A comparable theme appears in Aditi’s posts, where she highlights how women are often denied the right to choose a partner, pursue love, or move freely to access education. Unlike the others, however, she draws on real-life incidents to illustrate these structural constraints. Seema, an influencer category creator, in her feminist reel further reflects this pattern by framing everyday acts, such as “walking freely without covering my head” or “eating before my husband”, as basic rights. Such narratives frequently operate within a heteronormative framing of neoliberal empowerment, where women’s empowerment is expressed through relationships with men (within marriage, romance, or domestic roles) rather than through women’s autonomous power. In contexts like India, however, even these seemingly modest assertions carry significance because such freedoms remain socially constrained.

We see this especially in influencer-tier content, where agency is portrayed as a personal choice or consumer decision (go to the gym) rather than a structural change. While micro- and mid-tier creators anchor their resistance in social norms (consent, justice, film narratives), influencer creators often end by offering solutions that hinge on personal action. For example, as Gill (2007) shares that postfeminist subjectification can coexist with entrenched gender mandates. In practice, across tiers, empowerment is performed as personal voice and choice, but structural patriarchal constraints remain largely unchallenged.

5. Affective and Emotional Labour

Micro-creator Aditi pours raw feeling into each post. Her confessional reel on the positions of girls in her community, where she visibly works through trauma to motivate viewers. She manages her emotions and shares intimate pain to connect with followers. These posts are

testimonials that demand emotional labour from both creator and audience; they aim for empathy and solidarity.

Mid-tier creators also engage with emotions, though often masked by irony or motivation. Priya feigns frustration to provoke an emotional response in her post; her final expressions carry an implicit confidence and challenge, performing discontent with sexism while appearing stylized. Anjali's reels are emotive monologues; her vocal tone rises in indignation when discussing "family shame," conveying righteous anger. Both mid-tier cases curate emotional arcs to create a narrative. Yet their personal stakes are less visible; they may not sacrifice privacy, but they labour intellectually and emotionally to frame each story for impact. Influencers wield emotion strategically. Mona's narration on going to the gym is passionate, almost aggressive. Her effect is high-voltage to match the dramatic framing (e.g., echoey violin background). Seema's speech reel about feminism is measured but veers into indignation when listing norms, then flips to empowerment with a smile. All influencer narratives are polished products: emotional beats are edited in (b-roll of gym flexing with determined facial expressions, triumphant music, etc.).

Crucially, this labour is often uncompensated and fraught. Roy and Chakraborty (2024) discuss how Indian women micro-celebrities must "share a carefully curated but intimate representation of their personal lives", an intertwining of the intimate and performative. Their affective and emotional labour gets exploited in vlogging (Roy & Chakraborty, 2024).

In our study, all tiers endure this exploitation. Micro-creators gain no direct economic return from their brave disclosures (indeed, they risk social exile), and yet they shout into the void for awareness, and to get support. Mid-tier creators may acquire followers or brand features, but they often recount heavy topics for little reward. Influencers may monetize through products or services.

In order to comply with the rules of social media, they make sure to use words that won't flag their content. That workaround itself is emotional labour, coding grief into symbols. This self-censorship while discussing taboo subjects adds to the emotional burden. Patnaik (2022) cautions that social media visibility is not an impartial public sphere, but a neoliberal terrain. She notes that digital platforms are "not neutral, apolitical" spaces and cultivate precarious "technoprecariat" conditions for creators (Patnaik, 2022).

In practice, mid-tier and influencer creators push out content daily (even pinned at three posts), whereas micro-creators have far fewer posts. The pressure to perform constantly (for likes, views, relevance) creates emotional exhaustion. All tiers engage in emotional labour, but the disparity in visibility and rewards means micro and mid-tier creators bear disproportionate costs. Influencers, while also vulnerable, at least have more buffers (brands, community support) to soften the impact. Shah (2021) has documented how this affective labour is distributed unequally across creator positionalities. Marginalized creators, particularly women, find their affective labour underpaid compared to creators with more social power.

Duffy's notion of "aspirational labour" applies that what begins as personal testimony can turn into unpaid work for platform and sponsor engagement (liking, commenting, and sharing) (Roy, & Chakraborty, 2024). Creators are motivated by a desire for recognition and solidarity, yet this "fame-work" depends on never-ending self-exposure (ibid.). It is seen that women creating empowerment content frequently find themselves positioned as counsellors, mentors, and community leaders. The emotional care work, responding to audiences disclosing trauma, providing validation, offering support, is often hidden, and could lead to burnout and compassion fatigue.

6. Respectability and Moral Policing

All creators navigate respectability and moral policing on their content. Micro-creator Aditi voices her dissent on how people do not want women to leave their homes even to study. They want to control her mobility. She openly talks about how her mother lies to the community in order to avoid scrutiny. In another reel, she highlights the social exclusion imposed on women who exercise their agency in ways that do not conform to dominant cultural expectations.

Mid-tier creators experience surveillance and contend with social respectability norms. For instance, Anjali's reference to "shame" in the film *Haq* dialogue shows how even educated, urban women internalize the tension between voice and honour. Her content implicitly acknowledges that outspoken women are stigmatized. It is expressed that women are judged, including herself, through the rigid culturally acceptable parameters imposed by society. And goes on to challenge society's unachievable expectations. Priya's video directly addresses respectability tropes too, when she lists all the adjectives used for women's bodies. She calls out the deep biases that police women's appearance and behaviour. Both mid-tier creators thus fight respectability politics by making those judgments visible and absurd.

Influencers confront surveillance on a grand scale. Their content can reach millions (Mona's first reel had 16M views) and draw both supportive and hostile crowds. They also navigate Instagram's automated moderation. Mainstream influencers like Seema openly critique culture; she takes on moralizing comments head-on. However, her rural-based scenes of "village committees" adjudicating divorce reveal the harsh realities of institutions.

Across all tiers, there is a tension between expressing authentic resistance and maintaining a respectable self. Micro-creator literally risk shame in their communities; mid-tier creators risk social media pushback; influencers risk losing mainstream brand deals or community guidelines. This reflects "respectability politics" that reward conformity to class- and caste-based proprieties. All tier creators negotiate this by framing empowerment in "safe" terms rather than advocating radical change. These formulations avoid alienating moderate viewers. Thus, respectability pressures infiltrate every tier; even as creators push boundaries, they do so within palatable limits. They do not radically break norms, reflecting Gill (2007)'s observation that postfeminist subjects often pretend empowerment while staying within acceptable feminine codes.

7. Commodification of Empowerment

We see that empowerment itself becomes a commodity, but unevenly across tiers. For micro-creators, the aim is not profit but solidarity; however, their personal power is still moderated by platform economics. Aditi's videos likely brought her attention but not money; she negotiates empowerment as visibility. Their content is free intellectual and aesthetic labour.

Mid-tier creators straddle activism and nascent monetization. Anjali leverages motivational narratives to grow a platform (she pinpoints trending issues to stay relevant), which could attract more work or collaborations. Priya's makeup/grooming videos could easily lead to brand partnerships (common for beauty influencers). Indeed, Priya's ironic feminist tutorials essentially package feminist ideas into the popular beauty genre, commodifying her message into a trendy format.

At the influencer tier, commodification is explicit. Theresa Senft's (2008) concept of "microcelebrity" provides a crucial lens for understanding digital identity construction. Senft describes microcelebrity as a practice of "treating one's online presence as a site of continuous public performance: as a career, as a personal brand, as a form of intimate labour for entertainment and market purposes." Mona announces a new series (diet, workout, rest

routines), essentially branding herself as a fitness entrepreneur. She is promoting individualized resistance by showing Fitness as Agency. Here, gym training ("lift so much weight") defies aesthetic policing ("you will not look like a girl"), promoting physical strength as a survival strategy in the absence of male protectors. Here, empowerment becomes a sellable project i.e., the forthcoming Instagram series (diet, workout, routine) markets fitness services under empowerment branding. The reel uses a politician's already-condemned stance without dismantling deeper patriarchal structures, favouring personal optimization. Putting the burden of change on individual women rather than on institutions. Making it into a personal project purchasable through services or lifestyle changes (Rottenberg's concept of "market-friendly feminism"). It exemplifies feminist media scholars' critique: empowerment is rebranded as a marketing pitch (Gill, 2007). "Empowered women" become a demographic target; empowerment becomes a lifestyle brand to be consumed.

We see the double-bind Gill describes as these women subjectify themselves as empowered agents, yet simultaneously conform to market norms. For instance, Mona's muscular self-presentation is courageous, but it also adheres to Instagram's beauty fitness aesthetic. All creators across tiers show that the performance of empowerment is embedded in platform capitalism.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how empowerment emerges as a complex interplay of platform affordances, aesthetic practices, and socio-cultural hierarchies. Empowerment is articulated throughout the analysed content in post-feminist neoliberal narratives as carefully curated aesthetic, and emotionally resonant storytelling. There is a clear variation seen in how creators of different categories adapt their performances to the platform's visibility economy: micro creators from a village setting adopt raw storytelling while mid-tier creators translate feminist critique into viral-friendly formats; influencers frame empowerment as lifestyle and entrepreneurial aspiration "brand".. Narratives of resistance and agency coexist with pressures of respectability, moral policing, therefore revealing the persistent patriarchal digital scrutiny. The result is a layered digital landscape: the affordances of Instagram amplify certain voices (upper-caste and class, aesthetic narratives) while constraining others, ensuring that empowerment is always "at risk and always in the making" rather than fully achieved.

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To cite this digital working paper:

Tyagi, K. and Shipra (2026). *Online Spaces and Women: A Digital Ethnography Enquiry*. Development Dialogues No.11/2026. Digital Working Paper Series, School of Development Studies, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi.

This digital working paper series is an outcome of the '**Development Dialogues**' Seminar Series being organised by the School of Development Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, exclusively for showcasing the research findings of research scholars, young researchers, and alumni of the school.